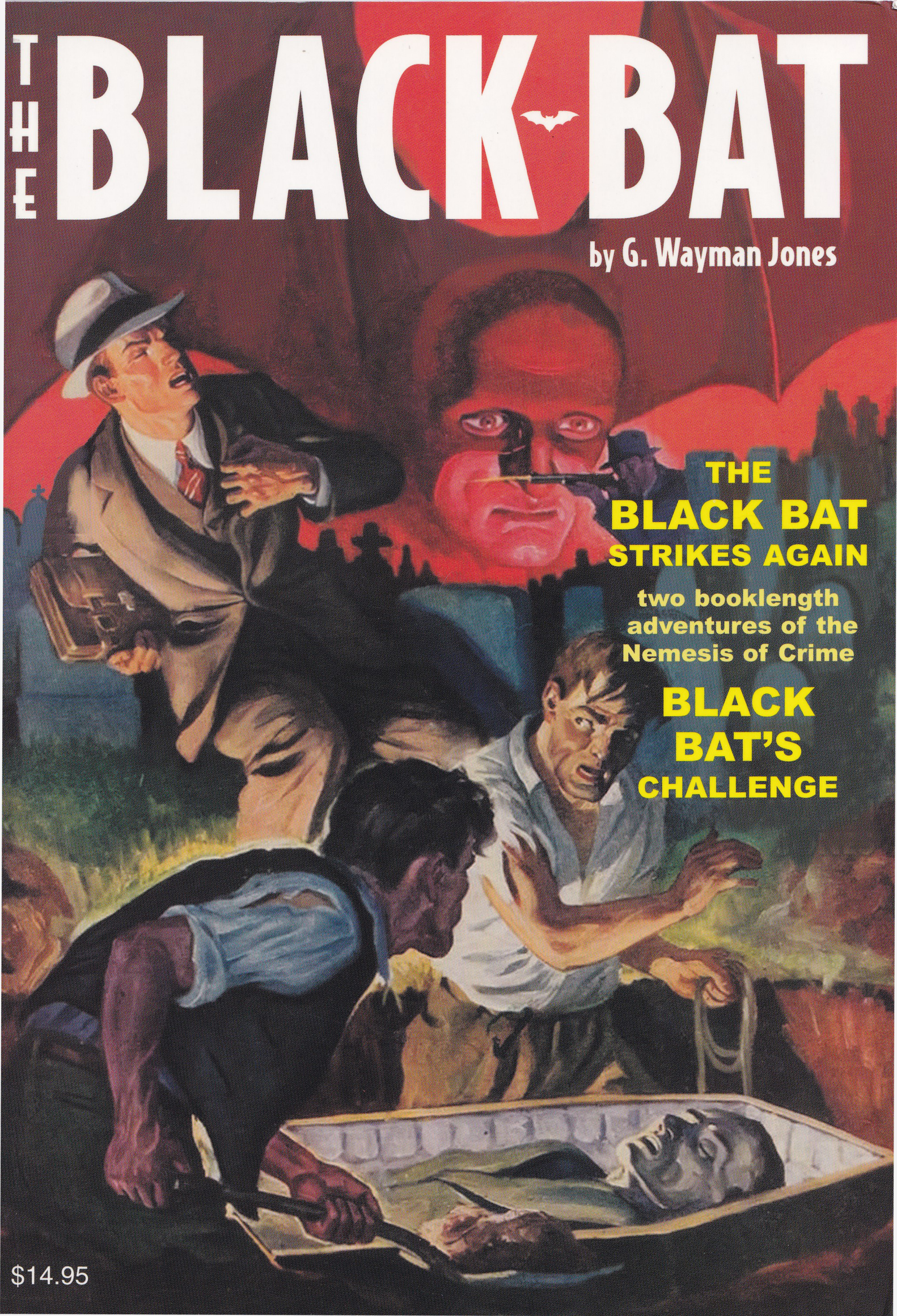
THE BLACK BAT

by G. Wayman Jones



THE BLACK BAT STRIKES AGAIN

two booklength adventures of the Nemesis of Crime

BLACK BAT'S CHALLENGE

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THE BLACK BAT

Volume 2

Presenting TWO Complete Book-length novels from the files of Tony Quinn, Nemesis of Crime, as originally edited by Leo Margulies, Mort Weisinger and Jack Schiff

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THE BLACK BAT STRIKES AGAIN

By G. WAYMAN JONES

Author of "Murder Calls the Black Bat," "Alias Mr. Death," etc.

A Complete Book-Length Mystery Novel

CHAPTER I
Graveyard Murder

A CAR pulled up to the cemetery gates at ten minutes of one in the morning. Three men clambered out. All wore high boots and they proceeded to drag out several shovels and picks.

One of them stepped up to the cemetery gates, took a key from his pocket and opened them. Another rolled the car through. Then the gates were closed and locked. Slowly the car wended its way around the many turns of the cemetery road until

One of the thugs dropped his gun and clawed at his shoulder (Chapter IX)

A Series of Mass Murders Sets Tony Quinn, Lightning-fast Foe of Crime, on the Trail of a Satanic Ring of Insurance Killers Who Make a Vast Profitable Business of Slaughter!

the driver threw a spotlight on a serried rank of tombstones. But only briefly, for the moment he saw what he wanted, the light was doused.

Assistant District Attorney Lew Scott, one of the trio on some odd nocturnal mission, picked up a shovel and a pick.

He was an eager young man, ambitious, honest and well liked. He faced one of his companions, a man smaller and thinner than himself and much more nervous.

"For the last time," he said softly, for the cemetery seemed to demand whispers, "you are sure? We'd be the laughing stock of the city if you happen to be wrong—and there might also be a nice little lawsuit in connection with this."

Jim Fisher, the man addressed, licked his lips and loosened the collar around his throat. The third man joined them before Fisher could speak—Dawson, an assistant coroner, as young and alert as Scott.

Apparently, therefore, this gravedigging party was highly legal, even if stealthy.

"I've a signed exhumation order in my pocket so we can go right ahead," Dawson said. "I'll perform a rough autopsy on the spot, the moment the coffin is opened. The body has been interred only two days so that will be easy to do. All I need are samples of the hair, nails and the stomach lining. It won't take more than fifteen minutes for my share of the job."

Jim Fisher walked over to the car and sat down on the running board before he answered Scott's question.

"I'm positive," he stated with grim finality. "Ralph Galvin is dead—in that grave. The doctor claims he died of a chronic stomach ailment. I've been away, as I told you. As soon as I got back and found out what happened, I sensed that something was not right. Galvin never suffered from any stomach trouble. Why, he used to boast of how strong his digestive organs were."

LEW SCOTT nodded. "Yes, yes. You've told us that a dozen times. What I want to be certain of is that letter you got from Ralph Galvin. You destroyed it, remember. You have no written evidence."

Fisher shrugged. "Ralph mentioned that he'd discovered there was an insurance policy on his life that he didn't even know about. A policy to the tune of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. In the first place Ralph couldn't afford a policy as large as that.

"And he certainly would have had to undergo an examination to take out a sum of insurance so huge. I thought nothing of it until I returned and learned that Ralph had died—suddenly. I think that whoever insured him without his knowledge must have provided a substitute for the medical examination and then killed Ralph to collect."

Assistant District Attorney Scott peeled off his coat and vest.

"Very well. It seems to me a clear cut case and we have the right to go ahead. Perhaps I should have consulted the deceased's family first, but if things are as you indicate, Fisher, we'd only be throwing in our hand face down. Apparently someone in the family stands to collect and before we act against that person, we must be absolutely certain that Ralph Galvin did not die a natural death. Man the shovels, boys. We'll exhume the body, give Dr. Dawson a chance to make an examination, then we'll bury it again until his routine is finished. If you are right, Fisher, we'll officially exhume it tomorrow for the second time.... Let's get it over with."

All three attacked the newly filled grave with vigor. It took them almost two hours of back-breaking work to expose the surface of the metal lid of the outer casket. District Attorney Scott hauled himself out of the grave, hurried over to where the car was parked and took a gasoline torch from the trunk. He lowered himself into the grave again, pumped air into the torch and lit a match to it.

Applying the flame to the sealed lid, he melted away the lead that made the outer casket airtight. With chisels, the other two men carefully opened the copper box until finally they raised the lid out of the grave. Ropes went down next and Fisher passed them beneath the casket. Carefully they hauled it up until it was swung out and placed on solid ground.

Scott used a screwdriver to open the casket, lifted up the lid and exposed the body within. Fisher shuddered and turned away hurriedly.

Only Coroner Dawson was used to this kind of grisly work. He handled it as a matter of course. From a doctor's kit he produced the necessary instruments. Snipping a lock of the dead man's hair, he carefully placed it in an envelope and sealed it. Then he cut portions of the fingernails and stored them in another envelope for examination later.

A wind had sprung up as they worked. Dr. Dawson put the envelope containing the lock of hair on the ground. It was lifted by the wind and carried off a dozen feet. Scott scampered after it. He caught it as it fluttered down on another grave. He pulled a broken flower pot out of the ground and thrust the envelope inside it. To further insure its safety, he turned the clay flower pot upside down.

"That will hold it until we're ready to go," he said. "Now Doctor, while you perform the actual surgery, I think I'd like to talk to Fisher again."

DAWSON nodded and selected his instruments. He began working deftly. Near the car Jim Fisher was trembling despite himself.

"I'm not a coward," he defended himself, "but this business is nerve-racking. Wouldn't be so bad if I didn't know the man, but Ralph and I—well, we'd been pals since we were in the first grade. I tell you he didn't die a natural death! If it had been an accident—or pneumonia—or an infectious disease, I wouldn't have questioned it. But chronic stomach trouble! Good heavens, that's impossible!"

Assistant District Attorney Scott drew the collar of his suit coat around his throat. It lacked only about two hours of dawn and the night had become chilly and raw.

"I know," he told Fisher softly. "That's why I fixed up this secret exhumation. If we're wrong, no harm has been done. If you are guessing right—we've got a nice murder case right in our laps. I haven't told anyone what we intended to do. Neither has Dawson, and I know you have not. From a study of the symptoms that Ralph Galvin

betrayed, Dawson has already judged that he may have died of arsenical poisoning. Victims of that drug act as if suffering from chronic stomach ailments, especially if the poison is administered over a period of time—as is usually the case in insurance murders. Those samples the doc is taking will tell the story one way or another. I... Fisher, listen! Did you hear something?"

Fisher nodded. "Yes. Sounded like someone prowling around those bushes north of here."

"Doc!" Scott called softly. "Hey, Doc—come over here."

Dr. Dawson ambled over and grinned broadly when Scott voiced the belief that they were being observed.

"Nonsense. Your nerves are jittery. It's the atmosphere that's got you. Who in the world would be prowling around a cemetery this hour of the morning except a trio of ghouls—like us?"

He laughed at their discomfiture and headed back toward the open grave. Suddenly he clapped a hand to his chest. A low, strangled groan came from his lips. He reeled a step or two, carried more by his momentum than his muscles. He half turned around, as if to beg aid. Then he crumpled and fell heavily.

Assistant District Attorney Scott leaped from the running board of the car where he had been seated and sprang toward the fallen doctor. Fisher, eyes bulging in horror, saw Scott stop dead and slowly, like the work of a slow motion camera, fold up and topple to the ground ten feet from where Dr. Dawson lay.

Fisher gave voice to a wild, shrieking yell. There had been no sound, yet both these men had dropped as though a silent specter had snatched away their lives. Fisher raced over graves, vaulted a tombstone and tripped over a projecting pot of flowers. He scrambled up with a choked sob and raced on. Something smacked into the ground near his feet and lent impetus to his flight. Then he felt something else hit him between the shoulder blades. A searing, agonizing pain gripped his whole body. He staggered another dozen steps before he collapsed. Vainly he tried to pull himself erect, clawing at the edge of a stone for support. He turned his head to look back.

A FIGURE—only a dark blob of shadow—was standing fifty feet behind him. A rifle was at the man's shoulder. It made no sound, but a bullet from it found a target in Fisher's body. It smashed through his left lung, penetrated his heart, killing him instantly. He fell, draped over the tombstone, a hideous nightmare of horror.

The murderer walked calmly over to where Dr. Dawson lay, moved him with his foot and saw the blood oozing from a wound directly over the heart. His lips curled in contempt. He proceeded to where Assistant District Attorney Scott was sprawled on the ground. Scott's body twitched. Life was not quite extinct.

As calmly as though this were an everyday occurrence, the murderer lifted the rifle slightly and sent a slug smashing through Scott's head,

Pulling off the gray gloves on his hands, the killer grasped the silencer on the end of his rifle and unscrewed it. He thrust this into his pocket, shoved the rifle under his arm and went over to the exhumed body. He picked up the envelope Dr. Dawson had left there, examined it and put this into his pocket also.

He spent twenty minutes going over the ground carefully, searching for the slightest clue that might give him away. Then he walked swiftly back to the row of small trees forming a hedge beside the cemetery road. The night swallowed him up with no sign that he had been there except the four bodies he had left behind: one cold in long death, the other three still warm and bleeding.

There had been no witnesses. Only the dead could testify against this living monster. It was close to the absolute perfect crime. Only one slight detail remained, and the killer knew nothing of that.

CHAPTER II
Phantom of the Night

IN A spacious house located in one of the better sections of the vast city, a man sat before a fireplace. He wore a smoking jacket and held a cane between his knees.

His eyes were blank—like those of a blind man—and around his eyes were deep, horrible scars etched by corrosive acid. The man was about thirty and, except for the scars, good-looking. He had a well molded chin, and lips that could smile warmly or grow thin and bitter.

Tony Quinn spent many hours in just this position, for to all intents and purposes Tony Quinn was blind. A dozen prominent doctors had testified to that and gave him no hope of recovery. Once a promising young district attorney, Tony Quinn had fought a physical battle in a courtroom to protect vital evidence against a grasping gangster. Acid, meant to destroy that evidence, had been splashed into Tony Quinn's eyes, blinding him—for life, according to all the doctors he had visited.

But Tony Quinn was not blind.

Those blank, staring eyes could see perhaps better than any pair of eyes in the world. By the cooperation of a dying man who had also fought crime and been made a cripple by criminals, Tony

Quinn had been given new eyes. The operation had been performed in secret and except for the doctor who had accomplished what other surgeons refused to attempt, and three other persons, no one realized that Quinn could see.

One of those who knew was seated in a straight-backed chair at Quinn's side now. A mass of newspapers lay at his feet. Norton Kirby, known as "Silk," was an ex-confidence man who had come to rob Tony Quinn and remained to become his staunch friend and ally. Silk wore the quiet livery of a servant.

"Something, isn't it, sir?" Silk mused. "Imagine—Assistant District Attorney Scott, Assistant Coroner Dawson and this Jim Fisher, all murdered in a graveyard beside a recently exhumed corpse. Sounds like a ghost story. You knew young Scott, didn't you?"

Tony Quinn nodded sadly.

"He began his career in my office when I was the district attorney. A nice boy, Silk. And clever, too. There were great things in store for him. Now he's been murdered. Why? The police don't know—no one seems to. It can't be just an act of revenge, else why was Dr. Dawson also murdered, and this man Jim Fisher?

"Silk, they were up to something. They exhumed the body of Ralph Galvin for a purpose. Someone murdered them so they might never voice their suspicions. For a man to shoot down three people ruthlessly means that what they were suspicious about must have been a vast thing. Read me that part—about what the police think."

Silk cleared his throat and began where he had left off. That part of the news story read:

> Commissioner Warner has taken personal charge of the investigation into the gruesome cemetery deaths that have stirred the city. There are no clues as yet, according to the police, but they are making a thorough and intensive investigation.
>
> The body of Ralph Galvin, apparently exhumed by the three murdered men, has been taken to the Stanley morgue for further examination. The only theory offered thus far indicates that Jim Fisher, a friend of the dead Ralph Galvin, must have suspected that all was not right with Galvin's death.
>
> In the pocket of the assistant coroner was an exhumation order. Assistant District Attorney Scott apparently had accompanied the other two men so that he might also test some story which Jim Fisher may have told.
>
> An autopsy has been performed on the body of Ralph Galvin. Coroner Williams states that death was natural, that there is no indication of violence and none of poison. It is his expressed opinion that if Scott and Dr. Dawson were hoping to find some incriminating evidence in the body of Galvin, their hopes would have been blasted.

"THAT'S ENOUGH." Tony Quinn held up his hand. "Silk, there's far more to this than appears on the surface. I knew Lew Scott, remember. He wouldn't have gone off half-cocked on some crazy story told him by a stranger. Exhuming a body is serious business and Scott knew that. I think"—he paused for an expressive moment—"we ought to have a look at that body in the morgue, Silk. Then a trip to the cemetery would be in order. The police are pretty routine sometimes. They may have missed something out there."

Silk didn't answer. He arose, walked over to the windows and pulled down the curtains. Then he made sure the doors were locked. Finally he doused the lights in the room.

"Ready, sir," he said simply.

Tony Quinn arose, thrust his cane beneath one arm and walked rapidly toward the west wall of the room. Though everything was steeped in darkness and Silk had to maneuver his way slowly, Tony Quinn moved as rapidly as though the room were brilliantly illuminated.

There was a reason for this: Tony Quinn could see as well in darkness as he could in light; perhaps even better. That operation on his eyes had rendered them more acute and given them a penetrating power over darkness.

A section of the wall slid back. Quinn and Silk vanished into a white-tiled room lined with shelves and racks containing chemicals, apparatus and books on every conceivable phase of fighting crime. For Tony Quinn's adopted mission in life was a battle with all the elements of the underworld and those crooked men and women who occupied high stations in life.

Quinn opened a small cupboard and took from it a black suit, a pair of black gloves, black crepe-soled shoes and a peculiar hood. He donned the clothing swiftly and then placed the hood over his head. It came well down over his shoulders and was attached to his arms so that when he raised them the cape arrangement seemed webbed and wing-like. He cast a weird shadow against the white-tiled wall—the shadow of a giant bat.

Tony Quinn pulled the hood from his head. He had adopted the name and insignia of this nocturnal creature because a bat is supposed to be blind and operates only in darkness.

"You had better stay here," he said to Silk. "Police Commissioner Warner usually drops in when he gets a headache over such crimes as this one. If he calls, tell him I'm asleep and that you don't wish to awaken me. Tell him I've been despondent over my blindness and haven't slept in days. That will stall him until I get back."

"Yes, sir," Silk answered with a tinge of sorrow in his voice. "But I thought, sir, considering the fact

SILK

that we haven't had much excitement lately, that you might—"

Tony Quinn, in fact, was the Black Bat, shoved his hood in his pocket, and grinned.

"Silk, old boy," he placated, "unless I'm very wrong, there will be a great deal of work for you before we close this case. I don't play hunches, but there's a strong supposition in my mind that the man or men who killed those three haven't finished their work yet. Hold the fort. I'll be back in a few hours."

QUINN donned a floppy-brimmed hat, drew it well down over his scarred features, then pulled a lever set in the wall. A part of the floor slid back to reveal a ladder leading into a passage hewn out of the earth. He waved to Silk, slid down the ladder and crawled along the passage until he came out in an enclosed garden summer house, far to the rear of his estate. This formed a perfect way for him to come and go as the Black Bat.

He slipped through the garden gate, looked up and down the silent street and saw no one. As he moved through the gate he kept close to the high wall and his black clothing blended so well with the darkness that he was practically invisible.

When he turned a corner he saw a coupé parked at the curb in front of a rooming house. That coupé was always left there for just such emergencies. It was registered in the name of one Jack O'Leary, better known to the Black Bat as "Butch." O'Leary was one of the three persons who knew Tony Quinn's nocturnal identity.

Quinn took a key from his pocket, unlocked the car door and slid behind the wheel. He rolled down the cross street, pulled his hat low and turned into a well-lighted avenue. Now his nerves began to jingle. If he were stopped for any reason and spotted in these black clothes, there would be suspicions. Almost every patrolman in the city knew Tony Quinn and firmly believed he was blind for life. If they saw him driving a car—well, Tony Quinn hated to think of the results.

Therefore he was most careful about how he drove, meticulously obeying traffic signals and keeping well within the speed limit. He drove far uptown and parked the coupé along a dark side street. After a careful look around he stepped out, swept off his hat, threw it into the coupé and donned the mask of the Black Bat.

The private morgue to which the exhumed body recovered from the cemetery had been taken was just around the corner. He cut through a neighboring yard, stepping over obstacles that would have tripped any man with normal eyesight. Even the slender wires of a croquet set were as plain as telegraph poles to Tony Quinn's eyes.

He came out behind the one-story building which housed the morgue. No one was on duty for who would ever be expected to enter a morgue? True, the exhumed body had been of great importance in a triple murder case, but now the autopsy was completed, the findings reported and the corpse only waiting for reburial.

The Black Bat crept silently to the front of the building. He made a swift examination of the door lock and had it open in three minutes. The manipulation of locks was one of the many fascinating branches of criminology that Tony Quinn had studied so intently.

He closed the door behind him softly. He carried no flashlight, for such an article would have been superfluous. The Bat saw everything plainly.

The corpse was covered and rested on a slab in one of the small autopsy rooms. He drew back the sheet, exposing the body. For ten minutes he examined it and finally gave up. There were no clues here. If this once had been Ralph Galvin—and certainly it had been so identified—then Lew Scott must have erred in exhuming it.

The Black Bat slipped out of the morgue, reached his car and drove straight to the cemetery. He climbed over the high fence, dropped lightly on the ground and proceeded to search for the scene of the triple murder. It wasn't hard to find for the grave still yawned open.

FOOTPRINTS were useless, for police and cemetery employees had trampled the ground into a mire. The Black Bat stood beside the grave and slowly turned around. His eyes swept over the ground, missing nothing. He saw a broken flower pot standing upside down on a grave about twenty

feet away. Otherwise this grave was neat. Flowers near the headstone had withered and died days before; but they indicated that the grave was cared for and that visits were fairly frequent. Therefore, why the broken flower pot spoiling the otherwise tidy grave?

The Black Bat strode toward the plot. He saw where the broken pot had been taken from the ground, literally ripped out, for soil had also been raised with it. He turned the pot over and, half buried in the dirt, he saw the soiled white edge of an envelope. Eagerly he picked this up, ripped open the sealed flap and saw a lock of hair.

Thrusting this into his pocket, the Black Bat felt a quiver of excitement course through his system. Someone had cut that hair from the head of the corpse and Dr. Dawson was the most logical person to have done so. In making tests for certain poisons, the hair is frequently used. And the Black Bat knew that the body of the supposed Ralph Galvin, now at the private morgue, did not have a lock of hair snipped off!

He had examined that body well enough to be certain. Anyhow, when a thorough autopsy was performed in a morgue, with all facilities at hand, examination of the hair would not be necessary. Therefore a substitution had been made! The corpse in the morgue was not the one exhumed by Dr. Dawson! Why? Galvin's family was considered one of the best. They were honest in all their dealings and were definitely not the type to insure a close relative, kill him for the insurance and then commit a triple murder so that their crime might not be discovered. Nevertheless, the Black Bat was sure that for some grim reason Galvin's body had been stolen.

He walked back to the open grave and looked into it. Something stirred at his feet and he glanced down. There was a puff of dust arising from the dry top soil, and the report of a gun. Instantly the Black Bat gave a leap that carried him over a high tombstone.

NOTHING happened, but the Black Bat wasn't one to wait for attack. He believed in the element of surprise to overcome his enemies. Ducking from behind the tombstone, he ran very lightly over the grass in a crouch.

He knew the exact direction from which the slug had come and made a half circle of the area.

Then the Black Bat saw them. Two men, crouched at the side of a vault, were trying to penetrate the darkness and spot their masked victim. One of them spoke in a hoarse whisper, every word audible to the Black Bat's sensitive ears.

"I tell you I had a look at that guy. He's got a hood on. I know he has or I woulda seen his face, wouldn't I? Dorkey, I got a hunch that was the Black Bat! If you ask me, we oughtta lam outta here as quick as we can."

The other man snarled an oath.

"The Black Bat ain't no better than any ordinary guy. What can he do that we can't? I hope it is the Black Bat because he's gotta show himself sooner or later and then—blam—he goes down with a couple of nice silent bullets in his back."

CHAPTER III
Doubled in Death

THE Black Bat smiled tightly and crept forward again. He was within a dozen yards of the two men when the frightened one discovered he had to do something to relieve the tension. He snapped on a flashlight and sprayed the beam toward the open grave. The other man snarled a warning and reached for the flash. It dropped to the ground and its ray struck the Bat squarely.

He fired from the hip. His bullet crashed through the lens of the flash and a curtain of darkness, deeper than ever, closed down over the graveyard. But the brief moment of light had been enough. Two slugs screeched past the Black Bat's ear. His own guns blasted twice, the reports so close together as to seem almost one.

The heavier of the two assassins folded up. All his joints and muscles seemed to have turned into soft wax. With a yelp of terror, the other man fled. Instantly the Black Bat was after him. The man leaped for the cemetery fence, clawing at the top wire. He pulled himself up frantically, a steel-like hand gripped his ankles and hauled him down.

He put up a short fight, trying to administer a jabbing uppercut, but it sailed through the air. A fist buried itself in his stomach and he doubled up with a grunt of pain. He felt both his arms seized, then he was pinned against the fence. His worst fears were realized as he looked up and saw the somber hood covering his captor's head, saw the wing-like cape that cast an eerie shadow—the shadow of a bat!

"Don't hit me no more!" he quavered. "I—I can't stand it. Don't hit me."

"Your name and where do you come from?" the Black Bat demanded. "Speak fast. All this shooting may draw the police. I haven't time to waste with you."

"Joe Hudson," the thug gasped. "I come from Frisco, honest. Me and Dorkey was to blast anybody that came to the grave at night. We was paid a grand to keep watch. I dunno who paid us. There was a guy named Bishop who runs a hock shop on

Carmody Avenue. We were told he was a right guy and we went there to buy us a couple of heaters. He offered us this job. That's the truth, so help me! I wouldn't lie to you."

"I don't believe you would," the Black Bat said quietly. "Anyway, if you have, you'll be sorry. I'll leave you here, tied up. But if I find no such man exists as this Bishop, you'll talk when I come back—plenty! Stand against that fence, spread your arms and legs as far apart as possible. Now—hold it."

With a coil of fine silk cord he took from his pocket, the Black Bat tied Hudson's wrists to the wire fence, then fastened his ankles. He didn't bother with a gag.

"You'll keep for a while," he said. "I'm going to see if your pal is beyond any help."

Only a cursory examination was necessary. The thug called Dorkey was dead, a bullet drilled squarely through his heart. The Black Bat returned to Hudson and tested the fellow's bonds to make sure he could not escape. Then he pasted a black sticker on the man's forehead—the cut-out image of a black bat with wings outspread.

"THAT'S just to remind the man who hired you that he has some competition," he said grimly. "It will also help you to explain to the police just how your pal came to be killed. And—mark this—when you get out of jail, make tracks for the Coast. If I see you again, I won't tie you with rope—I'll weight you down with lead."

The Bat scaled the fence easily and raced to his parked car. He knew one pertinent fact anyway. Dr. Dawson had examined the body of Ralph Galvin all right. He had snipped a lock of hair from the corpse—and that clue rested in the Black Bat's pocket.

Now he had to investigate this pawnbroker named Bishop. And find out why the Galvin family had identified a double as their kin.

When he was safely behind the wheel of his car the Black Bat stripped off his hood. So far he saw no signs that the shooting affray in the cemetery had been heard. The place was far from any habitation and no police guards had been posted anywhere nearby.

The pawnshop of Monty Bishop was a frowsy-looking place, surrounded by cheap restaurants and antique shops. A night light burned above the safe and the place was closed for the night. The Bat parked his coupé in a convenient spot, made sure he was unobserved, and crossed the street to plunge

A steel-like hand hauled him down.

into an alley beside the pawnshop. At the rear he discovered that Bishop lived behind his store. Lights were burning in two windows.

Drawing his hood well down over his head, the Black Bat edged toward one of the windows and peered through the dirty curtains. What he saw made him spring into action. A man was lying across a bed. His face was pallid, his outstretched arms twitched and his entire body apparently was racked by pain.

The Black Bat didn't take time to force a door. Instead he smashed a pane of glass with the butt of his gun, reached in and opened the latch. He swung over the sill and rushed to the man's side, lifted him onto the bed and made a swift examination. The man was dying fast, obviously poisoned, His face was purpled from congested blood, his lips were blue and his eyes bulging.

He tried to talk but no sound came from his gaping mouth. Vocal muscles were already paralyzed. The Black Bat could do nothing. It was too late for antidotes and he couldn't give one anyway, for he had no idea whether the lethal dose had been an alkaloid or a metallic poison.

Bishop died three minutes after the Black Bat reached his side. The murderer had acted with amazing speed to silence the man before the Black Bat arrived.

With a sigh, the Bat turned away. His best clue obliterated. Whatever lay behind all this murder, it was supervised by an efficient, far-planning mind. One who killed at will.

A frugal supper was on the table, stone cold now. The Black Bat examined a dish of gruel from which Bishop had apparently eaten his last meal. He scooped some of it into a small bottle and stowed this away. Then he began a careful examination of the premises. He expected to find nothing, so was not disappointed when his search was completed. Bishop's food might have been poisoned hours before—and by some casual so-called "friend" who possibly had a logical reason for calling.

THE Black Bat moved toward the door—and suddenly stopped. A man's shadow had passed across the window. For only one fleeting second, yet the Black Bat saw it. Drawing his gun quickly, he spun around when he heard the front door of the store being battered down and heavy, running footsteps. Men were closing in from the front and someone was on guard outside the only other exit. From the bold manner in which they operated, they obviously were police.

The Bat waited no longer. His gun lanced flame and the overhead light crashed out. The room was plunged in deep darkness. Then someone smashed down the back door. As the man came through, the Black Bat scrutinized him and groaned inwardly. It was Detective Sergeant McGrath of the police—McGrath who had taken an oath that he would bring in the Black Bat dead or alive. Someone had tipped him off. Someone who knew the Black Bat would visit Bishop, find him murdered, and be placed in a precarious position.

McGrath had sailed through the door with gun ready.

"Got you, Bat!" he gloated. "There's no getting away this time. Reach high or I'll drill you."

He saw a shadowy form flit across the room, then take more formidable shape as it was etched in silhouette against a window. McGrath did not shoot. He wanted the Black Bat alive. He wanted to rip that damned hood from his face and expose Tony Quinn. For McGrath would have bet his last dime that Tony Quinn was the Black Bat.

Even McGrath's commissioner laughed at that one. Tony Quinn was blind. How could a sightless man perform the escapades attributed to the Black Bat? But all the arguments had not swayed McGrath's stubborn conviction that he was right.

Raising his gun high, he charged. He brought the weapon down hard and his heart jumped in elation as the butt found a vulnerable spot. His victim dropped heavily and lay still.

"Lights!" McGrath yelled. "It's okay to come in, boys. Somebody get a bulb. The Black Bat put a bullet through the one in here. But I've got him! I've got the Black Bat this time! Step on it, will you? Get some lights in here and gather around. This is the night of nights!"

Someone supplied a bulb and the room was flooded with light. McGrath, gun still held ready, for he knew how tricky the Black Bat could be, knelt beside the hooded figure. He turned the limp form over, grasped the edge of the hood and took a long breath. The supreme moment was at hand. The Black Bat would be revealed and Sergeant McGrath could now turn his own brand of scorn on those who had scoffed at his theories. He ripped the hood up and over the man's head.

McGrath's jaw dropped wide. He blinked, then deliberately closed his eyes for half a minute. When he opened them again, he saw that he had not been wrong in what he had thought he had seen. The face beneath that hood was the face of Bishop. The pawnbroker! McGrath gulped and swore. Bishop couldn't be the Black Bat! That was out of the question. Yet here he was, hood and all.

There had been only one man in the room so far as McGrath knew. He drew back his hand to slap Bishop to consciousness, but paused sharply and bent closer. He blurted an oath.

"This guy is dead! He can't be the Black Bat anyway!"

A YOUNG probationary patrolman elbowed his way forward, eager to be of help.

"You're right, Sergeant! Know what I think? The Black Bat was in here and he put that hood over Bishop's head and let you slug him—let you wrestle with a dead man while he escaped through the back door. Say, that guy certainly is clever—" he said, excitedly.

"Ya-a-ah!" McGrath yelled. "Who's asking for your advice? Why are you pack of damn fools standing around like a bunch of morons? Somebody call the coroner! Somebody get the fingerprint boys and the Homocide Squad. I didn't kill this guy. He was dead when I slugged him. But I'll get the Black Bat if it takes me the rest of my life. He can't get away forever—not with tricks like this he can't. And I'll find out who tipped me that the Bat would be here tonight. I'm just getting warmed up."

"Steamed up, you mean," one patrolman muttered as he turned away. But he was careful that McGrath did not hear him.

CHAPTER IV
The Bat Moved In

MC GRATH had another shock half an hour later. When he returned to his squad car, he found a Black Bat sticker pasted to the rearview mirror. Gears clashed as McGrath started away from the curb. It was bad enough to be tricked—but in front of a whole detail of cops! Nothing could be worse. He vowed that next time he even had a glimpse of the Black Bat, he would shoot—and shoot to kill.

He cooled off considerably on his way back to Headquarters. It was best if he passed this off lightly, without betraying the rage that surged in his heart. The desk lieutenant seemed to have heard the news. He snickered when McGrath came in.

"Sergeant," he said with a wide grin, "Commissioner Warner wants to talk to you."

"Yeah!" McGrath ground out. "That's all anybody does is talk—talk, talk, about the Black Bat. I'm the only man who even tries to go out and get him. What's my reward, I ask you? Like a bunch of sapheads, you all laugh at me. Well, one of these days you'll laugh in the other direction because I'll drag the Black Bat in here and line him up in front of the desk. What's more, when you book him, the name will be Tony Quinn!"

McGrath swung down the corridor to his office. He composed his features before he reached for the doorknob. McGrath didn't feel any too good. Commissioner Warner was something of a marvel at handing out subtle cracks about efficiency. McGrath was in for a tongue lashing and he knew it.

Commissioner Warner was seated behind his desk, chewing on a cold cigar. His face was lined with worry and thought. He looked up, almost wearily.

"Come in, Sergeant. Sit down. What happened at Bishop's?"

McGrath gulped. "Well, the Black Bat was there all right. No question about that. He—he shot out the lights and then he threw a dead man into my arms—Bishop. He'd put his damned hood on Bishop's head and how was I to know it wasn't the real Black Bat? Anyhow—he got away. But he's going to have a hard time explaining Bishop, Commissioner. Somebody fed that crooked hock shop dealer enough poison to kill a mule. Maybe you got other ideas, but I think the Black Bat's gone in for murder—just like I always said he would. Sooner or later them playboys who think they're Robin Hoods get too gay, and what happens? A bump-off—and not in self-defense either. You don't poison a guy when he starts to haul off and paste you one on the nose."

Commissioner Warner nodded somberly. "I'm afraid you're right, Sergeant. We've another example of this. About thirty minutes ago someone discovered a man lashed to a cemetery fence—yes, the same burial grounds where the triple murder was committed. This man has been identified as a cheap little crook from the Coast. He wore a Black Bat sticker on his forehead and a knife through his throat.

"There was another dead man on the premises—shot by a forty-four caliber gun. The kind the Black Bat carries. It looks as though he's reverted to type. I never thought he'd come to the point of lashing a man to a fence and then murdering him in cold blood."

ABOUT the same time that Commissioner Warner was admitting that perhaps Detective Sergeant McGrath's prophecies had turned out to be true, the Black Bat had once more become Tony Quinn. But not blind Tony Quinn, for he was at work in his white-tiled laboratory, preparing an apparatus for use in doing a Marsh test for arsenic. He talked to Silk as he worked.

"I can't puzzle it out, Silk. Those men at the cemetery were not to watch for anyone who might come looking for clues. That means the killer who placed them there knew that the police, with all their searching, had missed something. I think I have that right here—in this envelope."

Silk looked into the envelope and grunted in surprise.

"Hair?" he asked.

Tony Quinn nodded. "Exactly. My theory is this: Dawson, the assistant coroner, clipped a tuft of hair

from the body of Ralph Galvin which he had helped to exhume. For some reason we'll never know, he put this envelope containing that bit of hair into a clay flower pot and turned it upside down. Now the murderer would naturally examine the corpse of Galvin, after he had disposed of the three living men. He'd notice that a tuft of hair had been removed and he'd look for it because this would be a vital clue for the police to find. When he didn't find it he must have worked fast to obtain a substitute body and then hide Galvin's corpse."

"But hair," Silk protested feebly. "What good is that, sir? I thought you had to test parts of the stomach."

Tony Quinn smiled and shook his head. "Not with an arsenical poison. Once it goes through the system, portions are taken up by the hair roots and passed right into the hair itself. We'll soon know."

Silk crossed his legs and leaned back, looking up at the ceiling. "I'd have given a year's pay to be able to see McGrath's face after you tossed him that dead man."

Tony Quinn chuckled. "I didn't see his face. When I realized he had me trapped, I removed my hood, drew it over Bishop's head and held him upright, until McGrath came with his gun swinging. Then I simply ducked out the door before McGrath had a glimpse of me. He was too busy gloating over his capture."

Quinn lighted a Bunsen burner beneath the small glass retort. He dropped half of the hair clippings into a solution and attached a long glass tube to the retort. In a few moments gas was evolved. Then he touched a match to the end of the glass tubing which had been drawn out into a fine nozzle. Light blue flame sputtered and as the supply of gas was intensified, it became steady, burning with an almost colorless light. Carefully cleaning off a piece of porcelain, Quinn held this in the tiny flame and watched it grow dark with smudge. He shut off the apparatus.

"And there you are," he told Silk. "Arsenic without the slightest doubt—and plenty of it. Ralph Galvin's body was filled with the stuff. His stomach ailment may have been chronic, but only because somebody had been feeding him poison over a period of time."

"But I thought they'd tested Galvin's body," Silk began.

QUINN shook his head. "Galvin's body was spirited away and another corpse put in its place. No—don't tell me that Galvin's family identified him. I'm aware of that, but—either they deliberately lied because they wanted to protect themselves, or they were forced into it. That shall be your job, Silk—to discover what made them lie."

Silk arose eagerly. "I'll begin at once, sir. A little disguise I used before will do the trick."

Quinn frowned. "It will have to be done cleverly, because if the Galvin family is menaced we can't afford to risk their lives. So you do this, Silk. Find out what company carried the insurance on Ralph Galvin. Go to his father and take the part of an insurance company's investigator. Act as though this was just a matter of course. If he asks questions, tell him you work independently, that the company insists on getting two reports. That will account for any other investigator having beat you to it."

Silk headed for the secret door leading into the study. He tensed suddenly, for a crimson light began flashing. Instantly Quinn drew on his smoking jacket, picked up his cane and darted for the door. He slipped over to the fireplace and dropped into the big chair which was his accustomed seat.

Silk straightened his coat and walked sedately to the front door. He opened it and was brushed aside by Police Commissioner Warner. The commissioner was alone, but there was an unholy purpose written on his face.

As soon as he strode into the room he stood before Tony Quinn, looking down at him in sudden embarrassment.

"You're excited, Commissioner," Quinn said softly. "What's wrong? Why don't you sit down?"

Warner crossed over to a chair and dropped into it. He put both hands on his knees and leaned forward, eyeing Quinn's blank eyes sharply and telling himself he was an intolerable fool. Certainly this man was blind. Hadn't a dozen doctors testified that his sight would never be recovered?

"I suppose I'm an idiot, Tony," Warner said. "I came here all hot about you. Sergeant McGrath, as you know, insists that you are the Black Bat. Sometimes I've been inclined to think so, too, but I've never permitted myself to dwell strongly on that point, for up to now the Black Bat has been of great help to me and my department. But tonight—tonight, Tony, the Black Bat has ruthlessly murdered three men. Two anyway. I'm not so sure about the last one. We found one of his victims lashed to a cemetery fence. There was a Black Bat sticker pasted on his forehead and a knife in his throat."

Warner's eyes narrowed as he snapped the last few words. If Tony Quinn were the Black Bat, he would show excitement over this. Muscles would twitch, his fingers would become nervous and tap the arms of his chair. Then Warner relaxed with a sigh. Quinn's facial muscles had not moved a hair's breadth. His fingers rested lightly on the arms of the chair and his vacant, staring eyes looked just over Warner's right shoulder.

He spoke gently.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Because Sergeant McGrath has insisted in maintaining that I am the Black Bat, I've naturally become interested in the doings of this man. However, don't you think it would be a difficult task for a blind man to tie someone to a fence and then stab him to death? Can't you see how impossible it would be for someone who had no eyes to commit murder or prowl around during the night as this Black Bat does?"

Warner made a wry face. "Of course I'm wrong. I know you can't see. I don't mind admitting that in the past I have had a sneaking regard for the Black Bat and I even hoped it might be you, Tony. Now I'm glad this is quite impossible. Murder is a one-sided game—the police hold all the cards. From now on the Black Bat will be fired upon at sight—fired upon by men who will have instructions to kill him."

Still Tony Quinn's expression did not change.

"Too bad," he murmured. "But, as you say, murder is murder. No man has the right to commit it—except in pure self-defense. You're all wrought up, Commissioner. Those cemetery murders are getting you down. I can tell it."

"And why shouldn't they?" Warner demanded. "An assistant D.A., an assistant coroner and a young man of mighty good reputation are all slaughtered in a cemetery, with the only witness a corpse that they had dug up. What does it mean? Why did they exhume the body? Why were they murdered?

"The corpse showed nothing suspicious. There was no more reason for those three men to exhume the body than there was reason for their being murdered. I tell you, Tony, this has me guessing. I can't tie it up with anything. There are no loose threads, no pointing fingers, not even an anonymous phone call from a crank. We're stymied, myself and everyone of my highly trained policemen."

Warner jammed on his hat.

"I'm sorry I bothered you, Tony. When I'm wrong, I'm the first to admit it. If that fool McGrath comes around pestering you, throw him out."

Silk held the door open and after Warner reached his car, Silk gave a long, drawn-out whistle.

"Say, it looks like something!"

Quinn did not move. Curtains were raised and there was no telling who might be watching. Above all things, Tony Quinn knew he must not give the slightest indication that he could see.

"It does, Silk," he said. "That little crook Joe Hudson was alive when I left him lashed to the fence. I did paste the sticker between his eyes, to let the world know that the Black Bat was taking a hand. But I didn't kill him. The man who hired Hudson and his killer pal must have reached the cemetery after I left, found Joe Hudson helpless and murdered him, knowing the blame would be placed on the Black Bat. He learned from Hudson that I was headed for Bishop's and he beat me to it. This means we've got to get the wheels going, Silk. We must work fast. And very, very carefully—for our friend Sergeant McGrath will be watching us."

"Hadn't I better warn Butch and Carol?" Silk queried. "Just to put 'em on guard."

Quinn nodded. "And to prepare them for action. Slip out the tunnel and see Butch personally. This phone may be tapped. Have him tell Carol, and be sure you aren't observed. When you come back, I'll have a plan formulated."

Silk disappeared through the secret door. Tony Quinn sat back, letting his head rest against the back of the chair. His eyes were wide open and starkly blank, but his mind was pounding home facts, registering little details and storing them up for the future.

CHAPTER V
Silk Meets Danger

OF ONE thing Tony was sure: what Warner and his police department thought to be only a series of baffling murders was in reality but the beginning of more trouble. There would be ramifications to reach into the depths of the underworld represented by such characters as the murdered Joe Hudson, his pal Dorkey, and Bishop, the pawnbroker.

The tentacles of this crime series would lift upward into another world where men and women like Ralph Galvin and his highly respected family moved. And over it all would lord a cunning, vicious beast to whom human life was as nothing. A clever being, quick to turn the misfortunes of others to his own benefit. When his hireling had been overpowered by the Black Bat, he had thought fast enough to pin murder on the shoulders of the night marauder. Quinn was beginning to acquire a certain reluctant respect for this man.

His agile mind began planning, lining up what he already knew with probabilities. It would be necessary to use all his forces in this game of life and death. Silk would be a natural to investigate the Galvin family. He had the poise and smoothness to deal with people of that kind.

Quinn thought then of Butch O'Leary, a man mountain of strength and weight. A slow thinker perhaps, but a vast menace when he got rolling.

Then there was Carol, in all her loveliness; who had entered his life so mysteriously and given him back his sight. Quinn's mind went over the past, slipping easily into it. At Carol's request he had gone secretly to a small Midwestern town where a country doctor had performed an operation that the

greatest surgeons in the world had refused to try. Carol's father had been a police officer. He had been shot in the back and in the head and was a blind paralytic, slowly wasting away.

It had been Carol's father who had donated portions of his blind, but healthy, eyes so that Tony Quinn might see again. The bullet that had smashed into his brain had severed optic nerves, but though the eyes could no longer see, they were intact. By some strange freak of Nature those eyes, parts of which were grafted to Quinn's eyes, gave Quinn the power to see in darkness as readily as in daylight. There was no accounting for this phenomenon except that it might have been Nature's method of repaying Quinn for the months of blindness that he had endured.

Then Carol's father had died and she had come to demand that Quinn allow her to take part in his campaign against crime. Her quick wit made her a valuable ally and between the two a warm friendship was ripening into love.

Those three knew that Tony Quinn was not blind and that he had become the Black Bat. They would carry that secret to their graves.

WHEN Silk climbed out of a rented car about mid-morning the next day, those who knew him would never have recognized him. The quiet, thin servant of Tony Quinn had become a red-cheeked, loudly dressed individual. He strode up the sidewalk to the big mansion of the Galvin family and kept his finger on the door buzzer until a pretty girl admitted him.

"From the insurance company," he told her. "I'd like to see the whole family. It's very important."

A man with white hair and worried, tired eyes came out of a room. Silk recognized him instantly. This was Peter Galvin, retired banker and the father of Ralph. Peter Galvin motioned the girl away.

"You are from the insurance company?" he said to Silk incredulously. "But I thought everything was already agreed upon. Your man, who saw me yesterday afternoon, assured me that there would be no more delay in paying the policy."

"Double check, Mister," Silk said with the air of a man who didn't like to be contradicted. "I've got to see every member of your family—all of them."

Peter Galvin nodded somberly, motioned Silk into a huge living room, then summoned the other members of the family. They arrived one by one and Silk, apparently engrossed in studying a file of papers, eyed them individually. There were four—Galvin's wife, her mother, Galvin's youngest son and a daughter still in her teens, the pretty girl who had opened the door.

"Is this all of you?" Silk asked suddenly. "I thought—" Galvin sat down fearily.

"I can't see why all this fuss is necessary," he complained. "My daughter Elaine isn't here. She—she couldn't stand all the publicity and went to her aunt's for a rest. Now what is it you wish?"

"Wait a minute," a man's voice bellowed.

Silk looked around. In the doorway stood a beetle-browed, narrow-eyed man. He was well dressed, but it took more than clothes to distinguish him from the underworld to which he obviously belonged. He had one hand deep in his coat pocket and Silk sensed that a gun was trained on him.

"Just who is this guy?" the man in the doorway demanded. "Before we tell him anything, I'm calling the insurance company. I think we got a crook on our hands. Galvin, phone the company and be damned quick about it."

Galvin sprang to obey and the way he acted made Silk think that he and his family were utterly dominated by this black-browed thug. Tony Quinn's reasoning seemed to be working out.

Galvin returned in a few moments, white and shaken.

"The insurance company tells me that they have no representative of this man's description and that they are prepared to mail me a check for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars today. He—he must be a fraud."

"Yeah, that's what I figured," the burly man snarled. "Listen, you—I'm Galvin's secretary, see? My name is Collins and what's yours? The right one, I mean."

Silk only crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair. Because he could think of nothing to say, he wisely kept his mouth shut. If Collins hadn't gripped a gun, Silk might have made a dash for the door. That was hopeless. He would be cut

Carol

down with a bullet before he took a dozen steps.

HE HAD failed the Black Bat. The only thing to do now was remain quiet, refuse to disclose his purpose in coming to this house, and pray that his disguise would not be penetrated.

"So you're dumb, huh?" Collins snarled. "Well, maybe you'll open up to the cops. Stand up, wise guy, and elevate your mitts. Hold 'em just like that while I give you a frisk."

Collins found no gun. He sifted through the blank pieces of paper in the briefcase that Silk carried and hurled them on the floor. Then he jabbed Silk with his gun, marched him into the hallway and picked up the phone. He dialed a number.

"This is the Galvin residence," he said. "There's a phony here who says he's from the insurance company, which is a lie. Send a couple of boys down to pick him up, and make it snappy."

Peter Galvin moved nervously to Collins' side.

"Don't you think we might handle this without the police?" he asked, and his voice trembled slightly.

Collins showed his teeth in a wolfish grin.

"I'm taking charge of this rat. You keep out of it. He's a fake and the cops can take care of him. What are you trying to do—protect him? Is he a pal of yours?"

"I—I never saw him before in my life," Peter Galvin quavered. "I swear it!"

"Then shut up," Collins basked.

Silk leaned indolently against the wall and smiled slowly.

"For a secretary, Collins," he drawled, "you show doggone little respect for your employer. If I were Mr. Galvin, I'd push your teeth right down into your mouth and fire you without pay."

Collins stepped close, which was exactly what Silk had hoped for. A man of his ilk would try to gun whip his victim as the worst possible kind of punishment his warped brain could conceive. Collins had just that idea in mind. But as he raised his gun, Silk suddenly lost the indolent attitude he had assumed. He went into a crouch and smashed home a savage punch to the midriff.

Collins howled in pain, brought the gun down, but only succeeded in crashing it against Silk's shoulder. Silk grinned slightly, brought over a short right hook and drove Collins' nose awry. Blood spurted from it and Collins reeled back. He tried to raise the gun, but Silk was much too fast for that. He seized the gun hand and gave the wrist a hard twist. The gun landed on the floor.

From the living room came the screams of the three women. Peter Galvin was backing up, hope shining in his eyes. Then Collins, sensing that this human tornado was getting the best of him, clipped off orders.

"Galvin, conk him with something! Bean him with a chair. Do it, or you know what'll—"

He did not get much further for Silk brought his jaws together in a teeth-grinding blow. Collins roared and lunged for Silk, who sidestepped easily. He was not paying much attention to Galvin. The older man was just as much menaced by Collins as Silk. He should welcome this battle and the overpowering of the thug.

But Collins' words had had a strange effect on Galvin. He had turned pale and wild-eyed. Suddenly he picked up a chair, raised it and brought it down on Silk's skull. Silk collapsed to his knees. Collins, though half groggy, was quick to take advantage. His cowardly kick clipped Silk just under the jaw. Silk keeled over and lay still.

He awoke in a moving car, but when he opened his eyes, only darkness met his stare. He almost screamed, thinking he had gone blind. Then he realized that he was enveloped in some kind of heavy canvas sack. Barely enough air was seeping through to keep life in him.

HE REALIZED that to struggle now would only bring about quick retaliation from his captor—or captors. So Silk wisely decided to play possum. Sooner or later something would happen to give him a break and then, too, he doubted that Tony Quinn would have let him follow out this scheme without some kind of protection.

Silk estimated that the car was driven along for about thirty minutes after he regained consciousness, but that meant nothing for he had no idea how long he had been out nor in what direction he was being taken. He could hear mumbling voices, but the enveloping sack prevented him from discerning any words.

Finally the car stopped and he was hauled out, sack and all. Two men, apparently, dragged him over the ground and bumped him up three or four steps. A door slammed and there were more voices. Then the sack was opened and draped down over Silk's shoulders in such a way that he was as much a prisoner as if steel cables bound him.

He blinked in the light and glanced around. He was in some kind of big house that was well furnished. Four men stood before him, gazing down and grinning broadly, but not in mirth. Their harsh faces showed only a sadistic gloating.

One of them was a scrawny, ungainly type with loose fitting clothes and a hatchet-like face. He seemed to be in command.

"I guess," he decided, "we'd better turn this baby over to Gringo Joe, eh, boys? Gringo can make anything talk from a tree to a mummy. Cart him down to the cellar."

CHAPTER VI
A Trap for the Bat

SILK was yanked to his feet and dragged across the room to a small, narrow door. One of the men opened it and a steep flight of steel stairs was revealed. Silk was propped up at the head of the steps and given a violent shove. He rolled down the stairs, bruising himself badly with every turn. He heard the door above slam shut and mocking laughter from behind it.

Silk sat up slowly and started to peel off the strangling sack. He looked around the room and saw a long white table against one wall. Then his gaze traveled to the left and his muscles suddenly froze. A man was seated in a straight-backed chair that was tipped until it slanted against the wall. A man? To Silk he seemed more like some monstrosity out of the past.

He was huge and had primitive features. His eyes were piggish and definitely pink. His lips were fat and ugly. He had arms that were covered with as much hair as an ape's. His waist was narrow, his chest barrel-like. Here was a man possessed of an unbelievable brute strength and a tiny brain that probably would function in a bestial manner to match his appearance.

Silk struggled out of the sack and stood up weakly. He was still reeling from the effects of that fall and his head felt as though a ton weight had dropped upon it.

The brute rocked his chair forward until it creaked under his weight. He raised one hand and crooked his finger.

"So I have a nice fresh customer, eh? Come here, my little one. Come closer so that I may see just how tough you are."

Silk doubled his fists, puny things against a monster such as he now faced.

But Silk had rare courage. There was no element of fear in his makeup. Yet he knew that little beads of sweat were standing out on his forehead. This man reeked of a horrible menace.

The brute sniffed in contempt.

"Thin and scrawny," he decided. "Now turn around and look at that table. Look, I say, or shall I take out your eyes and bring them over there?"

He arose as his voice became a bullish roar. Silk turned his head. On the table were various wooden forms and some tools. They meant nothing to him.

The brute drew closer and suddenly one huge paw flicked out. It closed around Silk's throat and lifted him as if he were nothing but a small rag doll. Like an automaton, the beast carried Silk over to the table and set him down.

"That long box"—he pointed to the object—"is my own little invention. You put the arm in it, full length. Then I pull the box apart maybe three or four inches. Next I take the steel hammer and bring it down. The bone breaks like a matchstick, you understand? The longer box is for the leg. I can break it in five places so you will never walk again.

"Now look at that steel box at the end of the table. It is large enough for you, no? If you are put into it with the metal door closed and then little hammers banged on the outside, just above your ears, you will go mad within three hours. You will be a nervous wreck, fit only for a hospital. Now do you begin to understand why you should tell me everything?"

Silk tensed and prepared to spring on this giant. He knew how futile his strength was, but anything was better than submitting to these medieval forms of torture.

SUDDENLY he crouched and drove the most powerful blow he was capable of into the pit of the big man's stomach. His fist hit what seemed to Silk like a panel of steel. It drew only a loud howl of derision from the monster. Silk felt himself seized in a viselike grip. He was lifted off his feet and swung up on that bench. One arm was forced into the long, boxlike affair and strapped there. The giant held him down with one hand and picked up a hammer.

"I shall break it just above the wrist first," he announced gleefully. "It hurts the most there. Then if you do not talk, I shall break it again—and again until there is no arm left. But perhaps the tongue—now it wags a little bit, eh?"

Silk gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. It was too late now for the Black Bat to intervene. And even if he came, what could he do against this monstrosity? It was better, Silk decided, that he should die than have the Bat appear.

The hammer came down in a testing blow, but it brought a spasm of agony to Silk. He bit his lower lip until the blood ran. Over and over again in his mind pounded the thought that he must not talk. No matter what happened, he must not give way!

IN Peter Galvin's big house, Collins slammed the front door shut with a grunt of satisfaction. Silk had been carried out and thrown into the back seat of a sedan that was now pulling away from the curb.

Peter Galvin touched Collins' arm.

"I—I don't like this. Those men didn't look like detectives and that wasn't a police car. What are you up to?"

Collins sneered and struck the older man across the face with the flat of his hand. Then he snorted in contempt and walked up the stairs. At the top he turned around.

"You mind your own business and stay healthy,"

he snarled. "Then somebody else will stay healthy too, get me? And stop that blubbering or I'll knock you stiff."

He set his jaw aggressively and swaggered down the hallway to his room. This was the life Collins enjoyed—bossing around a millionaire and his whole family. Telling them where to get off. And they would behave. Collins knew that.

He opened the door of his room, muttering about fools who stuck their heads into a trap. As he turned around, his mutterings ceased and were replaced by a long, drawn-out gasp. A man was seated in a chair near the bed. He was tall, well built and completely encased in black. The hood over his head flared out below the shoulders until it looked like the ribbed wings of a bird.

"The Black Bat!"

Collins managed to get out those three words. Then his hand started toward his pocket.

"I wouldn't do that, Collins," the Bat said quietly. "Not unless you believe suicide would be preferable to a long term in prison—or possibly the electric chair."

Collins gulped and stared at the automatic resting lightly against the Black Bat's thigh. He raised one hand and nervously massaged his throat.

THE BLACK BAT

"YOU—you're in the wrong house. This is Peter Galvin's house. I—I'm his secretary. I—I—"

"Be quiet," the Black Bat said. "And don't make me laugh. Secretary, did you say? Why, man, you couldn't compete with a two-year-old child in a spelling bee. But you can talk a little. Supposing you tell me just where your two good friends took that insurance investigator."

"They weren't pals of mine," Collins mumbled. "They—they were cops. That insurance guy was a fake. I—I—"

"Where did they take him?" the Black Bat went on relentlessly. "And while you're at it you might also tell me on whose payroll you happen to be. Don't say Peter Galvin's. You're here only to see that he and his family stay in line. I want the truth."

Collins sat down weakly and rubbed his hands. The weight of the gun in his pocket gave him no confidence at all. This was the Black Bat who faced him; the Black Bat who could shoot faster than any man and outthink any clever brain.

Collins' eyes flashed around, looking for an avenue of escape. He saw the window open behind the bed. That was how the Bat had gained entrance. Collins estimated his chances of taking a long jump and a header out the window. It was only eight feet to the ground; the rear of the estate rose up high.

"I asked you a question," the Black Bat reminded him.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Honest, I—I just work here. Listen, I ain't no crook. I'm on the level, I tell you. Ask Galvin. He'll say the same thing."

"Galvin would say any words you put into his mouth," the Black Bat countered stonily. "You hold some cudgel over his head. I'll ask you about that later. Right now—where is that insurance investigator?"

The Black Bat's gun came up and centered on Collins' chest. The crook shivered, for those glittering eyes from behind the mask spelled sudden death.

"I can't tell you just where they took him." He licked his lips as he spoke. "But I—I got a road map marked out in case I wanted to go there, too. It's in the pocket of my other suit, in the clothes closet."

Collins could not see the twist of the Black Bat's lips. All he was concerned about was that the Black Bat was falling for what he was saying. Falling hard. Collins suddenly acquired a new regard for his own quick wits.

The Black Bat walked up to Collins, took the gun from his pocket and searched him for sleeve or leg weapons. Then he walked over to the closet, opened the door and stepped inside.

Like a flash, Collins was out of the chair. He slammed the closet door shut, heard the spring lock snap, and went out the window as though a ghost was on his tail. He landed in a clump of bushes, tore his clothing and his flesh, but got up instantly,

raced to the garage at the rear of the house and climbed into a fast roadster. He shot out of the driveway, turned right and gave her the gun.

Collins didn't see another car start away from the curb, a block north of Galvin's house. He only felt a sense of relief he had never experienced before.

"If I had had a roscoe, I'd a gunned the Black Bat out," he told himself.

"That guy ain't so clever—falling for an old gag like that."

THE pursuing car kept a good distance back, but right on the trail. The man behind the wheel was a huge individual with a bent nose and a decidedly cauliflower ear. His hands were miniature hams, with fingers abnormally thick. Butch O'Leary was just as powerful as he looked. Slow-witted perhaps, but tenacious. Nothing short of a serious accident would stop him from following Collins.

But Collins suddenly sensed the presence of a trailer. By glancing in the rearview mirror he saw the coupé turn when he did, speed up as he stepped on the gas, and slow when he decided to take things easy. Collins gulped and a wave of fear crept up over him.

Maybe this was the Black Bat! But no—how could that be? The Black Bat was still locked in that closet, unless he had smashed down the door and that would have attracted Galvin and his family.

Collins decided to make absolutely certain that he was being followed. At the next corner he swung right, made a similar turn at the following street intersection and did a complete loop around the block. The pursuing car was right behind him.

Collins headed out on the highway again and brought his foot down to the floorboard. He left the pursuing car far behind and with a flourish he leaned on the horn and shot by another car—a sedan—doing about fifty-five. As he whizzed by, he had a glimpse of the driver—a decidedly pretty girl.

CHAPTER VII
Swing to Action

AFTER a couple of miles, Collins eased up. He did not want a run-in with a motorcycle cop, for then that coupé might catch up with him. He noticed that the sedan with the girl driver hung in the distance, but Collins paid no attention to her.

He would have if it had been possible for him to watch that girl. She held the trail easily, having taken over when Butch was discovered. The Black Bat left few things to chance. He wanted Collins to rush to the hideout and he wanted him trailed. Therefore, if Collins suspected he was being trailed he might not go to his original destination, so Carol Baldwin had been following well behind Butch. When Collins made his several turns around a block, she knew what he was up to and stepped on the gas to race well ahead of him.

Butch dropped back and let Carol take over then.

Collins suddenly slowed and turned into the driveway leading to a large house that was the main part of a big country estate. He stopped beneath a portico, shut off the motor and got out. He saw the girl's sedan whizz by, but thought nothing more of her.

Inside, he gave a brief version of what had happened to the gaunt leader of this wolf pack.

"What could I do?" Collins spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. "He had the drop on me. Then he took my roscoe. I shoved him in the closet, locked the door and jumped out of the window. What's he able to do anyway? Not a thing. If he puts the pressure on Galvin, the old fool won't talk. Not so long as we got the kid safe. Say, that fake insurance investigator showed up okay, didn't he?"

The gaunt man nodded.

"He's down in the cellar—keeping Gringo company. In a few minutes he'll start talking. I think he's a police spy."

"Sure he is," Collins agreed. "Only the Black Bat was worried about him. But that's nothing. The Black Bat works right in with the cops, don't he? We'll know soon as Gringo does his stuff."

"Yeah," the gaunt man said, "but just to be sure, I'll put a couple of boys outside to watch. I hope the Black Bat does find this place Gringo would make a dead birdie out of him in about five minutes. Now I got to make a report. You take over."

"Okay, Antal." Collins used the gaunt man's name for the first time. "Nobody will be snooping around when I get through."

Antal walked upstairs, entered a room and locked the door. He went over to a dictaphone machine, sat down and adjusted a record. Then he picked up the mouthpiece and spoke in a monotone. This is what was recorded:

"Everything is going just as we planned. There has been a slight interruption from the Black Bat, but he has been thrown off the trail. Galvin gets the check in the morning. He will cash it and turn the sum over to us. Then we shall dispose of his daughter and tell him she is still being held so he won't talk to the police. A false insurance investigator appeared at Galvin's and Collins captured him. He is now in the hands of Gringo and when he talks, I shall report his story by the usual means. May I compliment you on that scheme for throwing the blame on the Black Bat? It has worked out so well

that the police have issued orders that the Black Bat is to be shot on sight. We must hope that he will be, for he is the only man I fear. I shall await your further orders by the usual methods and there is certainly nothing to worry about at the moment. Within three months, at the most, we shall clean up to the tune of several millions of dollars."

Antal shut off the machine, slipped the record off the rotator and carried it into another and smaller room. He remained in there for about twenty minutes. Then he came out with a neatly wrapped package, addressed and properly stamped.

He summoned one of the men, handed him the package and issued brief orders.

"Take the car Collins drove here in. Drive to the city and mail this from the Central Post Office. Return the moment you have finished."

The messenger took the package without comment. He had done this same thing many times before. Each time he examined the wrapper and noticed that it was carefully sealed, so he stemmed his curiosity and never tried to find out what was inside.

THE Black Bat, locked in the closet, remained there for about three minutes after Collins made his escape. Then he merely reached down and turned the latch. Collins had not remembered that most clothes closets equipped with spring locks can be secured from the outside, but opened from within without the use of a key.

Gun in hand, the Black Bat went out of the room and down the stairs to the first floor. He heard women sobbing and the steady beat of a man's feet as he nervously paced the floor. The Black Bat stepped into the room, gun lowered, and his other hand gesturing for silence.

"There is nothing to be afraid of," he said in a soothing voice. "Sit down, Mr. Galvin. There are a few details I must know."

"But Collins?" Galvin gasped. "He—he... that mask. I don't know—"

"Collins is gone and he won't be back." The Black Bat laughed softly. "Furthermore I'm betting that he is burning up the highway between here and the place where they have your daughter held prisoner."

"How did you know she was a prisoner?" Galvin cried and arose half angrily. "If this is some kind of a joke... if you're a member of this damned outfit that's been bleeding me, torturing my wife and family, I–I'll stand for no more of it, I tell you. I refuse to—"

"Hush, Peter," Mrs. Galvin said. "This man may wear a mask, but I think he means to help us." She turned to face the Bat. "There is no use in holding anything back. Yes, they have my daughter Elaine a prisoner somewhere. They threaten to murder her unless we obey them. Ralph died a week ago. He died suddenly, but for several weeks before he had suffered from stomach pains. The doctor signed the death certificate that death resulted from a chronic stomach condition—gastric ulcers."

The Black Bat pulled out a chair and straddled it. He placed his gun on a small table and motioned toward it.

"I am trying to help you—all of you. I know the trouble you are in, but I'm certain we can remedy these conditions. My gun is at your service if you wish to turn me over to the police."

Peter Galvin waved thoughts of the gun aside.

"No—I'm ready to talk. I couldn't stand much more of this suspense anyway. I think that my son Ralph was murdered. After his death, we discovered that he had taken out an insurance policy five months ago and named me the beneficiary. It was for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars—and incontestable. Then this man Collins came and told us that my daughter Elaine had not reached her aunt's and that she was a prisoner. Unless I obeyed orders, he said, she would be murdered. The first order was for me to hire this scoundrel Collins as my secretary."

"And Collins then forced you to go to the morgue and identify the body of the man found in the cemetery as your son. Yet it wasn't. That man was a stranger to you, wasn't he?"

Galvin lowered his gaze to the rug. "Yes. It was the most despicable thing I've ever done. But what choice did I have? There is Elaine—in danger every moment. I had to do it."

THE Black Bat nodded his masked head. The phone rang and Galvin started for it, but the Bat signaled that the call was for him. He answered and a girl's voice talked briefly.

"Butch dropped back and is returning for you. They have a place on Route Eleven. Watch for telephone pole numbered eight-nine-seven-two-one-three. Check your odometer and the house is just three-tenths of a mile further, on. It's pretty well hidden from the road. No signs of Silk."

"Thank you," the Black Bat said quietly and hung up.

He could not talk to Carol with the Galvin family within earshot. He returned to the living room and offered them no explanations.

"Be assured," he told Mrs. Galvin, "that your daughter is still alive. Until that insurance check is paid over to Collins, they wouldn't dare murder her. And if you wish to aid me in effecting her rescue, please do not consult the police nor anyone else. Not even your attorney. At the moment I'm rather badly wanted through something that is no fault of my own. I'm the Black Bat."

He heard the chorus of gasps and smiled behind his mask. These people, living a quiet decent life, would not have heard of the Black Bat frequently. The police were far from being enthused about publicity of that sort.

The Black Bat picked up his gun, stuffed it into a holster and made his way to the rear door of the house. He stepped out into the semi-darkness of late afternoon and within half a minute a car shot into the driveway. The door opened and the Black Bat got in beside Butch.

Butch backed out of the drive again and pointed in the direction toward which Collins had fled.

"He was a smart guy," Butch said. "He spotted me and I'm good at tailin'.

"But Carol was behind me and she shot ahead. Collins zipped right by her and never tumbled. She called, huh?"

"She called," the Black Bat said. "There is no time to be lost, but don't exceed the speed laws. If we were stopped, the delay would be much greater than that involved by taking our time. Silk is in that place, Butch. I'm afraid they may be working over him, trying to make him talk."

"They won't," Butch declared confidently. "Not Silk. Y'know I like him. He's a little guy and he can't fight no-how, but just the same there's somethin' under his skull. And he's right— every way. If they hurt him, I'll bust a few heads, I will, and no foolin'. Say, boss, what's it all about? You know yet?"

The Black Bat had donned his floppy-brimmed hat which concealed the mask over his head. The advancing darkness aided him also and he felt reasonably safe.

"I'm not sure," he told Butch. "So far it's a plot to cheat an insurance company. Anyway I'm only interested in saving Silk now. Silk and a girl who will probably be held a prisoner in the same place. Slow up—drive closer to the telephone poles so I can see the numbers."

Half a mile further down the highway, the Black Bat ordered Butch to head into a lane lined with overhanging branches, where the car would be well hidden. He got out, removed the wide-brimmed hat and motioned Butch to follow. The darkness was intense now, but that only aided the Black Bat, for there was no darkness to his eyes.

HE SAW the big house nestled in the middle of a grove of high pines. Then the Black Bat signaled Butch to drop flat. A man with a rifle across one arm was slowly pacing the outer edge of the spacious lawn. The Black Bat's hand rested on Butch's arm for a moment and his lips barely moved as he whispered:

"Stay right here! I'll draw him this way and leave the rest to you. Don't let him make a squawk."

Butch nodded eagerly and massaged his big hands. The Black Bat slipped away into the darkness until he crouched just behind a bush along the beat which the guard paced. As the man sauntered by, the Black Bat made a sibilant sound through his teeth. The guard spun around.

"Yeah?" he asked hoarsely. "Is that you, Trip? What's up?"

He received no answer. Gun under his arm, finger tight against the trigger, the guard began reconnoitering. He did not want to give an alarm—just in case he was wrong. Antal had not been too good-natured of late.

The guard thought he heard a rustling in the brush to his left. He turned toward the sound. Something huge and ghostly rose up behind him. An arm curled around his neck, throttling him, while another hand gripped his gun hand with such force that he was unable to pull the trigger.

Gradually the guard's struggles ceased and he lapsed into unconsciousness. Butch grunted, laid him down gently and proceeded to tie and gag him. This done, he looked for the Black Bat, but there was no sign of the man he worked for.

Butch knew his orders in a case of this kind. He squatted and waited.

CHAPTER VIII
Ruse Against Ruse

CIRCLING the house, the Black Bat spotted the second guard. This man was wary and not to be drawn into any trap. Nervous, too, for he had not seen his fellow guard at the front of the house.

The Black Bat suddenly stood erect and started to leap toward the man. But a bit of dry wood crackled underfoot. The guard spun, gun spitting a hail of death. The Black Bat dropped instantly and the bullets snarled over his head.

Then another shadowy form loomed out of the darkness. It was Butch, drawn to the spot by the gunfire. He landed on top of the guard, knocking him flat, and wrenched the rifle from his grasp. He measured him with a short right and sent him reeling into the brush.

But now men were streaming out of the house, all well-armed with guns and flashlights. The guard yelled to indicate his direction and then did a stupid thing. He charged Butch. The guard figured on getting in one savage kick to the belly. Fair tactics were no part of his career. His left foot shot upward. Butch swayed aside, reached down and seized the leg. He lifted the man, spun him in a grotesque adagio dance and then let his head smash against a tree trunk.

Someone fired, so Butch ducked out of sight. He made tracks for the denser undergrowth of the forest behind the house, but pursuit was close at his heels. He lost his pursuers, after a few moments, and paused to glance back. He saw a barely distinguishable form climbing a porch pillar. It was the Black Bat. While the occupants of the house were busy trying to locate the prowler, he had taken advantage of their excitement and found a way into the house.

When he reached the porch roof, he flattened himself against the side of the building and sidestepped to a window. It was partially ajar and a moment later he had slipped into a bedroom.

The estate outside was agleam with lights as the searchers tried to track down Butch. They had discovered one guard at the foot of a tree, possibly with a fractured skull. They spread out, intent on making a wide search. Two men were sent to the highway to watch for the culprit.

The Black Bat grinned behind his mask. If one of these men found Butch, it would be to his own sorrow. Butch was a past master at the art of lying in wait and leaping with a suddenness that brooked no defense.

The Black Bat opened a door slowly. A muffled, harsh voice reached his ears and he headed toward the source of it. He listened at one door and a few words were distinguishable.

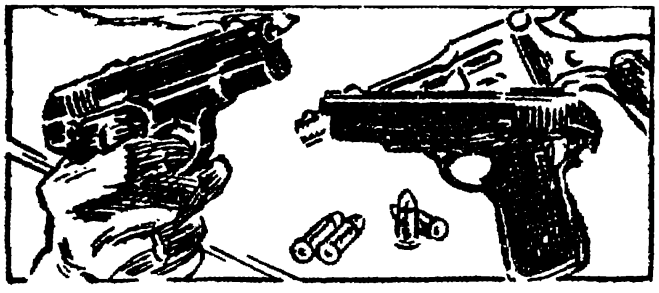
"—and you will administer the lethal dose tomorrow. Two days later have one of your women present herself to the insurance company as the beneficiary. There will be no delay in paying the benefits of the policy. Then that woman—disposed of in—usual manner. No—"

The Black Bat flicked down the safety of his gun, turned the knob slowly and hurled the door wide. He leaped through it, gun ready. But there was no one in the room and that mechanical voice had ceased. But a steady buzzing sound reached his ears. He saw a compact playback machine with its record still spinning. The Bat moved toward it.

Then the lights went out and a second later a door opened a crack. A jagged streak of orange flame followed in the wake of a bullet meant for the Black Bat's heart.

BUT by plunging the house in darkness, the intended killer had practically done the Black Bat a favor. For the killer was now himself handicapped by lack of light, while the Black Bat could see just as well.

The Black Bat's gun blasted twice. He heard a groan, then the sound of someone falling heavily. An ordinary man might have rushed toward that door, opened it and observed the results of his accurate shooting. The Black Bat was not an



ordinary man. He merely tiptoed to the further side of the room, crouched and kept his gun trained on the half-open door. His sensitive ears detected the sound of steady, hoarse breathing; not the labored breath of a wounded man.

Finally the gunman could stand the suspense no longer. His intended victim had not responded to the ruse and he figured that possibly he had slipped away, satisfied that his bullet had ended the life of an enemy. The door opened and the gunman was starkly revealed. It was Antal, the gaunt leader of this mob.

Antal tried to peer through the gloom, but it was impossible for him to see anything. He moved toward the door, slowly and cautiously, gun extended and ready for action.

Antal had not the slightest warning of what happened to him. He only heard a swish that ended in an exploding crash against his head. He slumped to the floor. Before unconsciousness took him, he managed to scream one word:

"Gringo!"

The Bat had no time to examine the man he had downed, for there was still Silk to worry about. He crept down the stairway. No one was around and he guessed that the sound of the shooting had not reached the outside where the other members of the gang searched for Butch.

The Black Bat tried various doors and saw no trace of Silk. Then he heard a stifled scream and loud, raucous laughter. He moved toward a small steel door that gleamed almost brilliantly through the darkness—to his eyes alone. It was locked, but the key was there and he opened the door, closed it softly and listened. Someone was at the bottom of the steps. Someone who looked like a gigantic gorilla.

SILK, held down on the table by the superhuman strength of this huge man, had realized that his life hung in the balance. He must stall in some way and Silk knew only one method. He was glib of tongue and his persuasive ways had turned more than one trick.

As the hammer came down in that painful, although only testing blow on his forearm, he groaned. Gringo leered down at him.

"I—I can't stand this!" Silk moaned. "I'll talk. Let me up. I'll tell you everything."

Gringo's repulsive features looked almost disappointed. Silk knew then that even if he talked, even went the limit by telling the whole truth, he would still die at the hands of this savage monster. Gringo seized him by the necktie and yanked him into an upright position. He stepped back a pace, fondling the steel hammer suggestively.

Silk talked fast.

"It's like this, see? Me—I'm a right guy. But I work alone and I didn't know I was cutting in on anybody else's racket. So I read about this business with Ralph Galvin and I says to myself, here's a chance to make some soft dough. I was going to spill a fancy line to the old guy—tell him his kid was alive and all that stuff. Then, for a nice juicy fee, I'd get him back. Understand? Once I had my hands on the dough, he'd never see me again."

GRINGO turned his head expectantly toward the further wall. Silk followed his gaze and saw a small amplifier hooked to the wall. It buzzed for a moment and then Antal's harsh voice came from it.

"He's lying, Gringo. That's the poorest story I've heard in years. Give him one more chance. If he doesn't talk, break his arm and then break every bone in his body until he opens up. I'll be listening."

Silk realized that the whole cellar was wired, that Antal could listen to every word spoken in this torture chamber. He repressed a shiver and his agile mind worked swiftly. Bluff was the only possible way out now. Sheer bluff!

"All right," he said. "I know when I'm licked, but you can't blame a man for trying. I'm a private detective, hired by the insurance company to make a thorough investigation of Ralph Galvin's death. And I might add that if you mugs plan to lay your paws on that money, you've got another think coming. No report from me—no dough from the company. We're stalemate, brother.

"Also, if I'm not heard from by ten o'clock tonight, the police will come looking. They'll go to Galvin's and force the truth out of the old man. You haven't pulled any wool over my eyes, my unseen friend. Not by a long shot. Galvin is being bamboozled into paying that money over to you. That's why he obeyed Collins and slugged me with a chair—me, who was trying to help the poor old guy."

The amplifier clicked and buzzed. Antal's voice reached them with more orders.

"Give him pen and paper," he said crisply. "Make him write a report that everything on the Galvin case is on the level and that the payment should be made on schedule. The message is to be placed into an envelope, left unsealed and addressed to the proper authority at the insurance company offices. I'll see that it reaches there within the hour."

Gringo leered at Silk. "You hear? Walk over to that little table and use the pen and paper in the drawer. Write as he says and do it quick, less'n I lose my temper and break your arm."

Silk sighed. He wrote two drafts of his supposed report, making them as long and detailed with fake news as possible, and when he finished each one, he swore and ripped it to shreds. He started the last one, writing slowly, praying for time so that the Black Bat might swing into action if that was possible.

Then, he couldn't stall any longer. Gringo was getting impatient and that raucous voice over the loudspeaker would open up at any moment. Silk scrawled a fake name at the bottom of the report, folded it and then addressed an envelope to a mythical person. Gringo took it with a snarl. He faced the microphone.

"It is done, Antal. You will send for it?"

"At once." The loudspeaker broke into life. "And if it does not meet my expectations, you may dispose of your friend as slowly and painfully as you wish. It is my opinion that he is a fraud anyway, for I am sure the policy is to be paid at once. Still, we must take no chances."

Silk sat tensed in his chair, awaiting the slightest break in his favor.

Though he knew that physical battle with this monster would have the same results as tackling a bull elephant gone mad. Gringo climbed the steps, paying absolutely no attention to Silk. There were no means of escaping from the soundproofed cellar. The only exit was the door at the head of the steps.

GRINGO handed over the envelope, but for a brief instant he was busy, grinning at the messenger. During that instant, Silk ran lightly across the room, scooped up one of the small steel hammers and held it behind him. He was back near his chair when Gringo turned around to eye him suspiciously. Three or four minutes went by; then the amplifier carried the terse message of Antal.

"The message is satisfactory. I think this man has finally told the truth. Guided by the report I now have, the insurance company will promptly pay its debt. You may kill him, Gringo. He is no longer of any use whatsoever to us."

Gringo's big mouth opened and he drew a long breath of satisfaction. He extended his great hands and moved toward Silk. Suddenly he dived. Silk dodged the rush, but landed against the torture table and instantly Gringo was upon him.

The big man moved with amazing ease for all his hulk. One of his hands rested on the table for a second and Silk took advantage of that.

He brought down the small steel hammer with all the strength he could muster.

Gringo gave a long drawn-out howl of agony. Tears rolled down his cheeks and he was convulsed by the pain that shot up his arm. Then he growled with rage.

The injured hand dangled limply at his side, but with the other extended, he grabbed at Silk's arm and caught it in a viselike grip. He hurled Silk against the wall, knocking him half senseless by the force of the tremendous heave.

Before Silk could gather his spinning wits and get up, Gringo had the fingers of his sound hand curled around Silk's throat. He lifted him like a rag doll and hurled him on top of the table. He picked up one of the hammers and raised it.

Then the amplifier blasted the sound of a shot.

There was silence for an instant, then Antal's voice screeched.

"Gringo!"

Gringo banged Silk's head against the table and left him there, unconscious. He moved toward the stairway, extinguishing all the lights in the cellar. He heard the door open above him and stealthy steps begin the descent.

Gringo snarled in the darkness and prepared to finish off this latest victim with one gigantic sweep of his mighty arm.

CHAPTER IX
Brute Strength—and No Brains

GRINGO saw a black-clad trouser leg emerge out of the gloom, and reached for it. But that leg was suddenly jerked out of range. Something hurtled above his head and landed lightly on the cellar floor. He whirled, and ran into a straight-arm jab that smacked him squarely on the chin.

An ordinary man would have been knocked cold by it, but the massive muscles of Gringo's frame resisted the blow effectively. He reached in the darkness and his good right hand landed on a substantial shoulder. He drew his victim closer.

The Black Bat felt those mighty fingers close on his shoulder and from the pain realized instantly that they were powerful enough to break every bone in his arm. He had his gun, but was too close to use it now. Anyway, most of the feeling in his right arm was gone. The gun dropped to the floor.

Gringo growled with pleasure, forced the Black Bat back through the darkness until he had him pinned against the wall. But strength was already flowing back into the Black Bat's arm. He raised it suddenly and struck a mighty blow squarely against the giant's throat.

Gringo felt that one. It turned his string of lurid curses into a choked gibber of pain. He let the Black Bat go momentarily and backed up. Instantly the Black Bat moved in. If he could land another of these blows, he might dispose of the man. The Bat realized that he was up against an opponent who was nearly a superman in strength and weight.

But Gringo was ready. He thrust out his arm stiffly and caught the Black Bat under the chin. The blow that hurled him backward made him lose his balance. He fell heavily. In a flash Gringo was kneeling over him, one hand raised to smash the Black Bat's skull like an eggshell.

"His hands!" The voice that came from the table was barely recognizable as Silk's. "He can't stand hurting his hands!"

The Black Bat squirmed free as Gringo's dull-witted mind slowly took in the meaning of Silk's words. Gringo started to arise, too, as the Bat sprung up, but he had to support himself with his good hand against the floor to do so. Instantly the Black Bat raised one foot and ground the heel of his shoe into that huge paw.

His heels were crepe, but he exerted plenty of weight and Gringo screeched in agony.

Silk was down off the table, staggering drunkenly forward to do what he could to aid the Black Bat. Gringo scrambled up, but in the darkness he could not see the Black Bat swiftly drawing an automatic from a shoulder holster. He did, however, see Silk's form loom up in the darkness. Quickly he gripped Silk about the throat and raised him off his feet.

"This man—your friend," he growled to the Black Bat. "Lie down on the floor—quick—or I break this man's neck with my fingers!"

The Black Bat had his gun raised. Silk was being held up as a shield, but what Gringo did not know was that the Black Bat could see. The automatic jolted once. It was one of the few times in the Black Bat's career that he sent a prayer speeding with the bullet. He knew how quickly this giant might carry out his threat. One convulsive grip of those fingers and Silk would be dead.

The bullet struck Gringo in the temple. He drew his massive frame erect, opened his mouth to screech, but no sound came. Slowly his fingers relaxed their grip and Silk tumbled to the fioor.

Gringo followed him later, landing with a crash that shook the house.

THE Black Bat sped to Silk and helped him up. Silk glanced at the dark bulk of the giant and shivered.

"Another two minutes and he'd have broken me into little pieces. That was a close one."

The Black Bat nodded, walked over to the table and examined the paraphernalia on it.

"Silk, turn on the lights so you can see this, too. Does it mean anything to you?"

Silk turned on the lights and hurried back to the table. He looked once at the instruments of torture, then closed his eyes. "I know what they mean, sir. That gorilla was getting ready to use them on me."

"Yes, I realize that," the Black Bat said, "But look at this layout. It's the type of thing that insurance gyppers use. They get their sucker insured, then break their arm or leg with these instruments. Probably use an anesthetic. The policy holder collects and the gang takes a cut. Silk, I'm beginning to understand many things. This mob is well organized. There is a keen mind to direct every move they make.

"It's an insurance swindle racket on a huge scale. Insuring young Galvin for a quarter of a million proves this, also. They are handling his case differently, though—and cleverly. Plain extortion or ransom might not get them anywhere. So they make sure Galvin is provided with money—and there they are. This Jim Fisher, who was found shot to death with Scott and Dawson, must have suspected, or known something. Scott exhumed the body secretly. He probably figured that in that way he would arouse no suspicions so that the gang might spread out and get away. There will be others involved—scores of them. Such a gang as this couldn't be organized so well unless the boodle ran into millions."

"You're right," Silk agreed. "This gang is equipped with every modern thing all right. There's even a microphone rigged up down here and an amplifier to transmit the messages of the skinny guy who bosses this job. He yelled to Gringo, and that saved my life."

The Black Bat hurried up the stairs. "There is a girl held here, also," he said as he went along. "Peter Galvin's daughter. She is to be held hostage until Galvin comes through with the benefits of his son's insurance policy."

The Black Bat opened the door, found the house still steeped in darkness and stepped into the hallway. A man moved silently across his range of vision. The Black Bat could even tell the color of his hair and his clothing. The Black Bat raised his gun quickly but it was too late. Lights flashed on. Two men were standing before him, guns pointed at his heart.

"Hold it!" one of them snapped. "You busted up this outfit nice and neat, but you're all done now, Bat. This is where the payoff comes—and to your pal as well."

Silk had his hands raised shoulder high, but was tensing to leap straight into the fire of those weapons before the Black Bat could move. Silk owed his life to the Black Bat and he meant to repay the debt if he died for it.

Fingers grew white against the triggers of the leveled guns. Cold-blooded murder was starkly vivid in the eyes of the two killers.

AN EXPLOSION suddenly roared out, but it was not from the two murder guns. One of the thugs dropped his weapon and clawed at his shoulder. The other shot a swift, fearful glance around, pale and shaken at this death that had come from an invisible hand.

"You're cornered!" a girl's voice cried. "I can see you but you can't see me. Drop that gun!"

The thug's gun thudded to the floor and Silk pounced upon it. The Black Bat moved forward.

"Take them into the other room," he ordered Silk. "Tie them—tight—so they'll keep until the police get here."

Silk gestured with his gun and both men marched ahead of him. As soon as the door closed, the Black Bat extinguished the lights in the hall. Quick, eager footsteps clicked through the house. A girl's soft, warm arms went about the Black Bat's neck. He held her close.

"Carol, you didn't obey my orders and get away

"You're cornered!" a girl's voice cried. "Drop that gun!"

from this spot after you phoned me," he said admonishingly.

She looked up at him, able to see only his dark outline.

"How could I leave when I knew what you were up against? Butch has been keeping all the others busy somewhere in the forest. There hasn't been anymore shooting so I suppose he's put them to flight. But I saw these two slip back and enter the house. I watched them through a window, then when the trouble started I slipped through it and shot. They knew you were in the cellar and they hid, waiting for you to come up. I—I never shot anyone before. It isn't so—nice."

The Black Bat patted her shoulders, then held her at arm's length.

"You only nicked him," he said. "Jail doctors can fix him up quickly enough. And I'm grateful, Carol. You returned my sight once. Now you've saved my life. I used to think you had no place in my work; I've certainly changed my mind on that score."

Carol laughed happily.

"You'll more than think so when you find out what I've got," she said. "After I phoned you, I came back. The car that I followed here came out with a new man at the wheel. He had some kind of package and I was curious. I followed him, slipped ahead and parked my car off the road. Then I—I hitchhiked. He picked me up. I—I'm afraid I rather encouraged him. Then in a nice quiet spot I stuck my gun into his ribs, took the package and made him get out. I imagine his feet are terribly sore by now. We were miles from anywhere."

She brought the package from a hiding place outside the front door. The Black Bat took it, examined the seals and glanced at the address. The written words loomed up as though they were spotlighted:

To Ronald Tunick—
2397 Belmont Drive

"Carol," the Black Bat said quickly, "he is the president of the Security Insurance Company."

He ripped sway the seals ruthlessly and hauled out a cotton wrapped object. It was a dictaphone record. His eyes lighted up.

"Got it, Carol! The boss of this infernal scheme transmits his orders by a recording. The records are played off by that skinny lieutenant I knocked cold. He's still upstairs. Let's get him."

THE Black Bat raced up the steps, gun in hand. He stepped into the room where he had left Antal. The gaunt man was gone!

"Slipped through our fingers!" the Black Bat groaned.

"I know him," Carol said excitedly. "They call him Antal. I watched him before you came. He was outside for a few minutes. He—he's a horrible looking man."

"And as bad as he looks," The Black Bat nodded. Then he drew a sharp breath, "There's a girl here. Must be! Perhaps that crook abducted her again. Help me search. We've got to find her!"

But they were stopped before the search even began. Butch strode into the house with one man slung across his left shoulder and another tucked beneath his right arm. Butch was grinning from ear to ear. The Black Bat turned on the lights.

"We played tag long enough," Butch said gleefully. "I kept 'em away from the house long as I could. One of them birds jumped outta the window and lammed. He had a car hidden and he picked up three more of them bozos. But I nailed these two—and did they talk. Say, boss, one of 'em says there's a girl locked up in a secret room. It's off one of the bedrooms upstairs."

"Great!" the Black Bat cried. "Take those two in where Silk is busy with a couple more of the same breed. Help him tie them up. Carol, upstairs with you. I'll find the girl."

They searched all the rooms. The Black Bat tapped on walls, examined mouldings and floors, but there was no sign of the hidden room. Then he turned out all the lights.

"Carol," he directed softly, "follow each wall and tap it with your fingers. Not too loudly. I think we may have a reaction."

Carol obeyed and then the Black Bat gave a low cry of relief. To his sensitive ears had come a faint call and tapping in answer to Carol.

Hurrying to the wall, the Black Bat went over it carefully in the darkness. It was a papered wall, but he found that one edge of paper overlapped another. He ran his sensitive fingers over the edge and found a slight projection. He pressed it and a section of wall sprang inward to offer about two feet of space for admittance.

Carol clipped through before the Black Bat could prevent her.

"She's here—and safe!" she called back. "But they've abused her terribly. She's been struck across the face—many times. She needs a doctor!"

CHAPTER X
Tony Quinn—At Home

QUICKLY, Carol helped a trembling girl of about nineteen into the room. She saw the Black Bat's image cast a grim shadow of a wing like ghost against the wall—and screamed. The Black Bat moved toward her.

"You mustn't be afraid," he said soothingly. "We came here to rescue

you. Within the next hour you'll be home.... Carol, is your car handy? Then take her back. Just help her to the door and then get away."

The Bat watched Carol help the half-starved, nearly prostrated girl out of the house. Then he turned into the room where he had battled Antal. Butch and Silk joined him a moment later and the Black Bat showed them the recording that Carol had lifted from the messenger.

"This lieutenant, in command of this place, sent a message to his leader. In a moment we'll know what that message was."

He slipped it on the playback machine and turned it on. The record scratched for a moment and then the refrains of "Silver Bell," an old recording, filled the house with music. The Bat gaped and sat down slowly.

"That's the oddest thing—unless that recorded music has a message contained between the notes."

He played it as slowly as possible and then as fast as the machine would go. Only the ancient tune rankled in his brain. He removed the record and examined it closely. No message was scratched on its sides or in the hollow of the cylinder.

Carefully rewrapping the record, he searched the room. He found several other records, all of them smashed, but there was a good sized chunk of one left. He slipped this on the machine. It scratched out:

"...Singleton is ready. Seventy-five thousand-dollar policy. Get to work... according to plan... kill Collins. The fool... snooping... knows too much...

The rest was spoiled by great cracks in the surface of the record. The Black Bat reached for a telephone on the desk. He got a rural operator and was quickly connected with the Police Department. He asked for Detective Sergeant McGrath.

"This is the Black Bat," he announced calmly. "Now don't have hysterics. I know you want me for murder, but I didn't kill that man. He was alive when I left him. Listen to me, will you? A mile past the junction of White River Road on Highway Eleven, you'll find a dead man and four prisoners. They won't talk if you rubber hose them because they don't know anything, but I imagine you'll find they have records sufficient to put them away for a time. The dead man in the cellar tried to murder me. I was forced to kill him. Yes—I said forced! Also, this outfit is part of a gigantic insurance ring swindle. They insure people, kill them and collect on the policies by devious ways. Commissioner Warner should be—"

But the Black Bat suddenly realized he was talking to someone else. He heard the slight click as the connection was switched over. By now Sergeant McGrath was calling every law agency in the vicinity and throwing out a dragnet for the Black Bat. He hung up, gestured to Silk and Butch and they sped out of the house. A car was parked at the rear of the house and in a moment they were racing away from the city—not toward it.

The Black Bat knew that McGrath would put barriers across the highway and stop every vehicle. He realized also that McGrath was apt to speed personally to the home of Tony Quinn.

DETECTIVE SERGEANT MCGRATH was a peculiar personality. He was as honest as a man could be, and wholeheartedly devoted to his duty. But he was possessed of one obsession—to run down the Black Bat and expose him as blind ex-District Attorney Tony Quinn.

The car, driven by Butch, swept down across a road and came out on an alternate highway leading into the city. They saw no patrols, but when they neared Quinn's home, the Black Bat touched Butch on the shoulder.

"Stop two blocks from the house. Silk, you get out. If McGrath is prowling around, stall him until I slip in through the tunnel passage. And remove your disguise, now."

Silk nodded. He removed all traces of his make-up and smoothened his clothing. Then he tilted his chin at just the right angle as befitted a gentleman's gentleman, and strolled nonchalantly down the street.

McGrath, with four patrolmen, was seated on the front porch. As Silk approached, McGrath jumped up and grabbed him.

"Okay, there's no use lying. Quinn isn't in that house. I've been banging on the door for five minutes. The Black Bat's loose, too, and you'd better know where Quinn happens to be or I'll know he's the Black Bat."

"But Sergeant"—Silk pulled himself free—"I'm afraid you're quite wrong. The master is in the house. He rarely answers the door when I'm not there. You know how sensitive he is about his affliction."

"Affliction, my foot!" McGrath bellowed. "He can see just as good as you or me. Better, if the stories I hear are correct. I know he's the Black Bat. I know he was twenty miles from here less than twenty-five minutes ago and I've got the roads covered so he can't get back. I'm going in that house and stay there until he shows up. Then maybe we'll see what kind of an excuse he can offer for a blind man taking a walk all by himself at night."

Silk shrugged, walked up on the porch and had some difficulty in finding his key. McGrath scowled at him.

"No use stalling. I've got men thrown around this whole house. Quinn isn't inside because he's out, being busy as the Black Bat."

Silk opened the door, turned on lights and McGrath pushed his way past him. He strode into the living room and directly up to the chair which

Tony Quinn habitually occupied. There McGrath stopped short and his face began to grow crimson, in a wave of color that mounted from his neck up and over his whole face. Tony Quinn was seated in the chair. His head was resting against soft cushions and he was fast asleep.

Silk elbowed McGrath out of the way with a disdainful glance.

"I informed you the master was here, but you wouldn't believe me. He didn't hear you because he is wearing ear stoppers, to cut out all sound. Watch!"

Silk gently pulled a plug of especially prepared substance from Quinn's ear. Quinn stirred and his head jerked erect. He didn't try to face those in the room, but there was a look of alarm on his scarred face.

"Who is it?" he demanded. "Who is in this room?"

"Sorry to have startled you, sir," Silk said smoothly. "But Sergeant McGrath was outside when I returned from my usual constitutional. He insisted that you were out somewhere flying around in the guise of a bat."

QUINN'S lips parted in a smile, "So sorry, Sergeant," he said. "I hate to disappoint you, but someday you'll learn I am not the Black Bat. I've been at home all evening. It is evening, isn't it? But of course, Silk served my dinner hours ago. A blind man with a horribly scarred face like mine doesn't enjoy himself outside very much. Sometimes I wish I was this Black Bat person you speak of. Now you want my alibi, I suppose. I haven't any. I spent the afternoon. writing at my desk over there. Some law work—the only thing that keeps my mind off myself and keeps me from cracking up."

McGrath walked over to the desk. He noticed that Silk had his back turned. Deftly McGrath folded one sheet of paper on which Quinn had been writing. He stuck this into his jacket and returned to face Quinn.

"I'm wrong, this time," he acknowledged grudgingly. "But I still think... Oh, what's the use! If I bothered you, I'm sorry. Good night."

He strode out of the house, whistled for his men to break up their cordon around the place and was off. Silk rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"I was watching him in a mirror, sir. I wonder what he swiped that bit of paper for?"

Quinn kept on staring blankly at the fireplace.

"He isn't missing a trick, Silk. He hopes, one of these days, to force the Black Bat to write. He'll have a sample of my handwriting and then—handcuffs."

Tony Quinn yawned and went to bed.

With the morning, Quinn resumed his accustomed spot in the living room and while he acted the part of a blind man, his mind went over each minute detail of the bizarre events that had transpired during the past two days.

He was lost in thought when the doorbell buzzed. Silk admitted Police Commissioner Warner. Though Warner did not know it, Quinn appraised him swiftly. Warner looked harried and worn. He showed lack of sleep and the nervousness that comes with fatigue. Warner sat down and rubbed a hand over his eyes.

"Something is wrong, Commissioner," Quinn said. "Can I help?"

Warner sighed. "You have no eyes, Tony, but you certainly know what's going on. Help me? If you only could! Listen to this: last night the Black Bat fought a tremendous battle against odds that startled everyone who knows. We rounded up several wanted men, found a dead gorilla in the cellar and evidence that the house was used as a sort of laboratory by a gang of insurance swindlers. The Bat put us on the trail and we've done some investigating. There were crews working in cemeteries all night. We've uncovered twenty-two cases of murder for profit and in every case the beneficiary, who received a substantial sum, has vanished."

Tony Quinn sat erect. His cane beat a steady tattoo on the polished floor.

"THERE'S a connection, then, between those deaths and the murders in the cemetery— the night that Scott was murdered," he mused. "Have you investigated that angle?"

"We've run a fine comb through it and found murder. Murder without clues. Last night Peter Galvin came to my office and confessed that the body he identified as his son was that of a total stranger. He told me that his daughter had been kidnapped and held as a hostage, that a thug was placed in his house to watch over him. Until he turned over the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars that was due on the policy covering his son's death, the girl would be held.

"Then—well, it seems the Black Bat took a hand last night. I think Galvin knows something about the Black Bat's activities, but he won't be tricked into admitting this. His daughter actually saw the Black Bat and some kind, beautiful girl took her home after the Black Bat rescued her."

Tony Quinn chuckled softly and Warner growled something under his breath.

"I. realize now, Commissioner, why Sergeant McGrath came blundering in here last night," he said. "He still thinks I'm the Black Bat and I suppose he hoped to find me out. I wasn't."

Warner sighed. "Oh, I know. He came to me this morning with the whole story. Said he wanted to get the jump on you in case of a formal complaint.

You know, Tony, the last time I was here I condemned the Black Bat, said he was a murderer. I'm sure I was wrong. I know I was wrong! If only you were the Black Bat! I need help—desperately. I need someone who can operate without all the red tape of the law. If I've ever hoped before, I hope now that the Black Bat can hear me."

Tony Quinn's face didn't move a muscle.

"You know, Commissioner," he said quietly, "that a bat has abnormally large ears. He might hear around corners."

Warner arose and put a friendly hand on Quinn's shoulder.

"I also know that bats are blind. If you think of any way to help, just call on me, Tony. I—"

The doorbell buzzed again. Silk announced the visitors with a voice that almost reached a falsetto in his excitement.

"Mr. Hugh Morgan and Mr. Ronald Tunick!"

CHAPTER XI
A Collector of Recordings

RONALD TUNICK!

The man to whom that musical recording had been addressed by Antal. Tony Quinn had to restrain the impulse to turn and look at this man.

He satisfied the desire when Tunick was shaking hands with Warner. He was a portly man with graying hair and keen, darting eyes. His companion was slender, animated and eager—the go-getter type.

He was carefully dressed and carried a briefcase under one arm.

"You are aware, Commissioner," Tunick said, "that I am the president of the Security Insurance Company. This man is Morgan, my ace agent. He's one of the best insurance solicitors in the business. Headquarters told me you were coming here and I took the liberty of dropping in. Ah—this is Mr. Quinn."

Tunick held out his hand. Tony Quinn didn't move. Warner whispered something and Quinn smiled.

"No need to whisper the news, Commissioner. I know rather keenly that I'm blind. Glad to know you, Mr. Tunick—and you, Mr. Morgan."

Tunick mumbled something about being sorry and Quinn waved his hand. "'I suppose," Quinn said, "that you are here about these insurance murders. The commissioner was just telling me about them. Very interesting."

"And costly," Tunick grunted. "Every few minutes we learn that we've paid a claim on a man murdered for the value of the policy. Three-fourths of the cases so far happen to be our clients. Morgan wrote several of them—the largest ones, unfortunately."

"But I only deal in large amounts," Morgan put in smoothly. "I was hoodwinked somehow, but I'll be double damned if I know how. I've prided myself on being most careful in this game."

"Something has to be done!" Tunick shouted hotly. "The public won't stand for mass murder like this without an arrest. Put your best men on the case, Commissioner! Stop at no expense. This is murder—mass murder!"

"Every man on my force is working on the case, from the newest rookie to the most seasoned detective," the commissioner assured. "We're doing all we can, Mr. Tunick. Have patience."

While they talked, Quinn's cane tapped continuously, as if he were deep in thought. But those taps carried a message that only Silk understood. From his post at the door, he decoded the message, waited three or four minutes, then stepped into the room.

"Sorry to interrupt, gentlemen, but the master asked me to tell him when a certain radio program went on." And he added in an undertone that almost made Quinn break out in a grin: "it's his only solace."

Silk snapped the switch and a dance orchestra blared a hot number. Quinn seemed to relax.

"Wonderful band," he said. "I love music—good, modern music—and the peppier it is, the better it suits me." Tunick growled something and then spoke louder.

"I hate that brand of so-called music. It's Tin Pan Alley. I like the old ones. In fact, I make a hobby of collecting old recordings. I pay fancy prices for them, too, and get my money's worth. There's an advertisement in several newspapers asking that old time records be sent to me."

"I'm sorry," Quinn said. "Turn the radio off, Kirby."

SILK snapped the switch again and discretely withdrew. In the hallway he mopped his forehead. Things were getting hotter than that music. So Tunick collected old records. Like the recording of "Silver Bell," sent him by a murderer named Antal.

Tunick talked for twenty minutes, recounting the cases that had been so far uncovered. Several of the deaths were attributed to chronic illnesses and found, upon autopsy, to have been poisoning. Others involved drownings and still others automobile accidents with fatal results that now began to look like staged "accidents."

Quinn absorbed all this information and, realized with a cold chill, that he was probably, fighting the most vicious gang of killers this country had ever known. When the trio departed, he called in Silk.

"We can't lose any more time," he said firmly. "I can't operate very well in daylight, so it's up to

you, Butch, and Carol. Phone them from outside. All three of you search every hospital in town for a patient named Singleton—probably dying or dead last night. Find out all you can about him and notify me at once. Snap it up, Silk."

For the rest of the day, Quinn fretted at his enforced idleness, but he did not dare swing into action. It was too dangerous, especially with McGrath on the warpath. Silk returned in time to prepare dinner, but with no results.

At nine o'clock there was a tap on the other side of the secret door. Silk quietly moved about, drawing the curtains. Tony Quinn rested his head against cushions that Silk arranged. It looked as if a blind man were going to rest for the evening.

But when the curtains were finally drawn, Quinn jumped up and entered his laboratory. Carol was there, seated on one of the high stools, with a pleased expression in her eyes.

"Carol!" Quinn cried. "You've found him!"

"His full name is Montgomery Singleton and he used to be a broker," she said promptly. "He has wads of money and he's been free with it. A week ago he was in a mild sort of an accident and got a metal sliver in his arm. Dr. Lawrence Luddy treated him, but he developed an infection and—he's on his way out. They gave him forty-eight hours more to live, and one of the interns even went so far as to put his arms around me in sympathy. I'm Montgomery Singleton's woman of mystery. He's in love with me and he doesn't even know it."

Quinn peeled off his smoking jacket and grinned.

"Out with the light, Carol. I'm changing into costume. Dr. Lawrence Luddy is about to have an after office hours visitor whose only ailment is an unholy desire to ask a lot of questions."

When the lights came back on, Tony Quinn had disappeared and a resolute man with flaming eyes drew on black silken gloves. He thrust his hood into a pocket, examined two automatics and stuffed them into holsters.

Carol stepped up to him.

"Tony—please be careful. These men are no ordinary killers. They're fiends! I've read all about what the police have discovered so far."

Quinn laughed lightly.

"The Black Bat usually returns to his nest in the cave, Carol. Thanks, anyway, for worrying about me. You go back to your apartment and stand by for orders. A smart, beautiful girl like you isn't to be left out of this game."

He waved to Silk, opened the passageway and vanished.

DR. LAWRENCE LUDDY maintained luxurious offices on the second floor of the medical building. He was a middle-aged, well fed person inclined to be cantankerous and fussy. It was ten o'clock. His nurse had gone and his last patient had been treated and sent home.

Dr. Luddy yawned and removed his white jacket. Then he heard the door of his outer office close. He swore softly, damning patients who thought they could make an office call at any time of the night. He opened the door, intent on administering an opinion along these lines. But instead he blinked and slowly raised his hands.

The man in his outer office was dressed in black and wore a hood with a cape that made him look like a fantastic bird. There was an automatic in his hand.

"I'm sorry for both the gun and my costume," the intruder apologized, "but the weapon is to prevent you from creating a scene. The mask for my own protection. I am known as the Black Bat."

Dr. Luddy backed away a few steps. "You're wanted for murder! Why are you here? What do you wish of me?"

"Sit down!" The Black Bat draped himself on the edge of the doctor's desk, "All I want is information. You performed a minor job of surgery on a man named Singleton, didn't you?"

Luddy nodded mutely and then, with an effort, found his voice.

"Yes—yes, I did. A piece of metal entered his arm and I removed it. He developed tetanus despite the fact that I gave him a shot of anti-toxin. It happens in such cases sometimes."

"Only this time," the Black Bat said softly, "it happened too conveniently. Singleton took out an accident insurance policy three weeks ago. It pays a quarter of a million dollars in the event of accidental death. Singleton is now dying. You know the family. Who will collect?"

"Why—why I suppose it will be his sister. He isn't married and she would be his heir."

"Doctor"—the Black Bat's eyes regarded the medical man critically— "would you mind showing me the instruments you used in removing that sliver of metal from Singleton's arm?"

Luddy shrugged, arose and walked over to a cabinet. The Bat watched him intently. He didn't trust this man.

Luddy removed an oiled silk kit, opened it and spread out scalpels, ranging from minute ones to the large knives used in major amputations.

"I keep them sterilized with an antiseptic solution," Luddy explained. "The removal of a splinter of metal involves no chance of infection if done properly."

"Then you didn't sterilize any instrument before operating on Singleton?" The Black Bat nodded. "I thought not—without offense to your ability, Doctor. I agree that instruments, properly kept and

handled, do not require sterilization for such minor work. Have you a microscope?"

Luddy nodded, opened a cabinet drawer and took out a high powered instrument.

"Suppose you take a culture from these scalpels," the Black Bat said.

"Stain them and see what you get. Believe me, sir, this is not just a hobby of mine. I think that Singleton was deliberately infected and the only way that could have been done was through your instruments."

LUDDY turned pale. He jumped up, arranged slides and staining solutions. In five minutes he had his eye glued to the microscope. The hand control in the mechanism shook slightly.

"You—you're right," he said tensely. "Every one of these scalpels contains an invisible layer of some soluble substance infected with streptococci. Good heavens! If I'd used these instruments on anyone else, the same thing would have resulted. Thank God, I had no occasion to use them. Now what's to be done? I–I don't know—"

He opened a drawer in his desk as he spoke. It was a wholly innocent motion, but the hand that deposited the microscope slides in the drawer also seized a small pearl-handled pistol. He brought it up, in line with the Black Bat's chest.

"Drop your gun!" he snapped. "Drop it or I'll kill you."

The Black Bat's automatic fell to the floor. Dr. Luddy let it remain there as he arose and herded the Bat toward a davenport. He motioned that he was to sit down and keep his hands high. Then Luddy backed up toward his desk and the telephone on it.

"I understand quite a few things, Mr. Black Bat. You're a crook. This happens to be blackmail. I suppose for a certain sum you'd have held your tongue. Oh, I know you could have ruined me professionally. Singleton will die—there isn't a chance for him. But I see through your smug little scheme. You couldn't possibly have guessed that my scalpels would be infected unless you had done it yourself. I'm going to turn you over to the police!"

"Doctor"—the Black Bat's voice was very calm—"you are making a grave mistake. How do you suppose your reputation would resist the idea that you have known Singleton a long time and that you've been courting his sister for several years? If she inherits, then you, too, inherit—provided you marry her. I'm only trying to protect you, to find out if you can give me a lead as to who infected those scalpels.

"It must have been done before Singleton had his accident, because I'm sure that was staged."

"As though I'd fall for that line!" Dr. Luddy sneered. "You're going to be handed over to the police—immediately."

Luddy raised the phone and dialed the number. He gave the police operator a cryptic idea of what was wanted, then hung up. The Black Bat's hands were high. He had arisen and now stood with his back against the wall, near the office door. Against one shoulder he could feel the light switch. He made a motion, as if shrugging in despair.

His shoulder blade raised the switch and the lights went out.

Dr. Luddy pulled the trigger and hurled a slug through the glass panel of his office door. That was the only shot he fired. The Black Bat was upon him, wrenching the gun free, forcing the doctor toward the davenport. He pushed him into it.

"That was foolish," he said. "Now stay where you are. Don't move. When the police arrive, I'll let them know just where you stand. Not a sound out of you."

Dr. Luddy, wide-eyed in terror, sat primly erect, hands extended. He heard someone bang on the outer office door and realized that the Black Bat had locked it. Then the door was crashed in. Heavy feet stamped across the waiting room and pushed open the door of the consultation room where Luddy sat.

"Don't turn on the lights!" Luddy half screamed. "It's the Black Bat! He's got me covered. He'll shoot!"

CHAPTER XII
Busy Bus Boy

FLASHLIGHTS broke the darkness, swept the whole office and then the lights were turned on. A uniformed man eyed Luddy with a critical eye. There was no one in the office. A window was open about an inch, but no human being could have crawled through that space.

"W-what happened to him?" Luddy gasped. "He—he was right over there. The lights were out. He put them out. I had him covered, but he got the best of me."

"Sure, sure," the sergeant said soothingly. "Now just what did the Black Bat want of you?"

Luddy looked up eagerly. "He said that I had—"

There he stopped. His face was bathed in perspiration. He dry-washed his hands until they hurt. If he ever tried to explain, they'd lock him up, probably charge him with murder, involve him in this huge ring that was killing off victims to collect on their insurance.

Something, whipping swiftly, like a snake leaping out of a coil, struck the window. The police rushed over to it. They saw nothing and turned back.

"Well?" the police officer demanded. Dr. Luddy looked at the rug. "I—I guess I must have been wrong. My nerves, they're ready to break. Please leave me alone. I—I'll be all right. I'm a doctor. I know about these things."

The blue coat jerked his head toward the door.

"Plain nuts," he whispered to the other men. "If he wasn't such a big shot, I'd drag him in. But he doesn't look violent. We'll take a chance and let him go."

They descended to the lobby, walked back to where the police car was parked at the curb. The driver got behind the wheel. Then his eyes grew round. He pointed with a finger that trembled slightly. There was the miniature image of a black bat pasted in the middle of the windshield.

"Back to Headquarters!" the police officer snapped. "This job belongs to Sergeant McGrath. He's the baby who likes to get on the Black Bat's trail. Me, I'd rather monkey around with a buzz saw on my left and a man eating lion on my right. Let's go!"

From the nearby doorway, the Black Bat watched the police car rush off. He was still panting slightly from the exertion of his escape. In the darkness he had used a coil of light, but strong, silk rope to effect his escape. By passing it around a radiator pipe, he had quickly lowered himself to the alley, then whisked the rope out of the window, leaving no trace as to how it had been done.

A bitter rankling in his heart for Dr. Luddy's deliberate double-cross made him plaster that sticker on the windshield. It would start things going, announce the fact that the Black Bat was still working against Dr. Luddy.

The Black Bat entertained something far stronger than a hunch that Luddy could have told more than he did. His actions made him a definite suspect. Who could plan such murder any more smoothly and easily than a doctor? Luddy would bear some further investigating on the Black Bat's part.

One thing he did know—that Singleton had been deliberately murdered, cleverly, and with all the efficiency that the murder ring displayed in every one of its cases. The Black Bat continued to keep Luddy's building under observation. If Luddy came out in a hurry, he wanted to know where he went.

A SLEEK three-thousand-dollar-limousine slid to the curb. A man got out, carefully adjusted his tie, drew his coat neatly together and buttoned it. Then he bent down and ran two fingers along the already immaculate crease in his trousers. This done, he walked importantly toward the office building lobby and vanished inside.

The Black Bat's eyes gleamed. The visitor was undoubtedly heading for Dr. Luddy's office. All the other physicians and surgeons who maintained offices in the building had gone for the night. And the newcomer was Alexander Paradon, Attorney-at-Law. A shyster, but smooth as satin, with a brain that could outthink almost any other attorney he ran up against.

He did not dabble in various forms of law. He specialized in handling insurance claims, Paradon had become the deepest and most vicious thorn in the side of all insurance companies that they had encountered in their extended histories.

Now Paradon was visiting Luddy; unquestionably called there in a hurry. The Black Bat whistled softly and decided that things were beginning to take shape. It was too dangerous to eavesdrop. Luddy would be suspicious and then, too, Lieutenant McGrath might come flying to the scene at any moment.

The Black Bat slipped through the night, reached his car and drove away. He removed his mask, donned his wide-brimmed hat and left the car in front of Butch's boarding house. Then he made his way along the quiet street, beside the wall of his own estate. Making sure he was unobserved, he slipped through the gate, proceeded along the secret passageway that led from the garden house and into the laboratory.

Silk was waiting when blind Tony Quinn tapped his way to the chair in front of the fireplace.

"Nobody called, sir," Silk reported. "Is everything quite all right?"

Quinn sighed. "It's all wrong. I haven't the least idea who is behind this murder ring. Suspects—oh, yes. There's this Dr. Luddy I just visited. He either unknowingly infected Singleton or he's as cool a killer as I've ever seen. His sending for Paradon is another thing I don't like. What's Paradon mixed up in this for? Except for a massive fee. And so far as I can figure out the only people who profit are the leaders of the ring and they get one hundred percent."

"Pardon me, sir," Silk said, "but when Tunick, the president of that insurance company was here, I watched him closely. He seemed a trifle nervous and that special agent with him—Morgan, wasn't it?—kept running his fingers through his hair and watching the door to see if anyone spied."

"I noticed that, too," Quinn said thoughtfully. "From newspaper accounts and from what Commissioner Warner said, most of the policies were with Tunick's company. And Morgan had written up three-fourths of those."

"I don't like it," Silk said. "To make matters worse they've had the jump on us every time. There's no telling how many more murders they will commit."

TO an observer who might be peeking through a window, Tony Quinn seemed to be casually talking about everyday affairs, His face showed none of the turmoil within him.

"We won a single round, Silk," he said. "We broke up part of his gang at any rate. And we have that dictaphone record. I don't know what it means or how it can possibly carry a message, but I do know that this Antal, second in command of the gang, sent his messages that way and received them in the same manner. I heard one of his records playing when I slipped into the house. Those records give us our only lead so far.

"They are addressed to Tunick, which is highly significant, and he has admitted collecting old recordings. We have the address to which they are mailed, but the thug from whom Carol hijacked our recording, has probably admitted what happened to his superiors. Now they'll use a new address or method of sending them."

Silk leaned forward. "Let's suppose that recording went through, sir. In the usual manner—to that post office box of Tunick's. We could watch, see who came for it and trail the man. Maybe that mug Carol outwitted decided it would be healthier if he took a trip to China."

Quinn let a slow smile come over his face.

"We think along the same lines, Silk. Prepare the package. Forge the seals and mail it in the original wrapper. Tomorrow morning you disguise yourself—the banker type this time, because they already know your other method of concealing your identity. Trail the man who comes for the package and have Butch follow you. Carol will be somewhere in the background just so there will be no slips. Now I think we ought to eat. A two-inch steak would be just about the thing."

Silk grinned. "It's on the fire, sir. I anticipated this."

The next morning Silk's closest friend would not have recognized the man who seemed to have difficulty in writing out an application for a foreign money order in the central post office. Silk had turned into a pompous, overbearing man in a white-edged vest, white spats and glasses that dangled from a black silk cord around his neck. He wore a derby, a tailored coat and striped gray trousers.

For an hour Silk had been there, watching the post office box where the recording had been placed. At ten-thirty a familiar figure ambled into the post office and Silk's eyes narrowed, It was Morgan, ace agent for the Security Insurance Company. He looked around, eyeing each individual. His gaze passed right over Silk, but it registered the appearance of the whitehaired banker.

Morgan took a key from his pocket, opened the lock box and pulled out a sheaf of mail. He carefully sorted it, tied a piece of cord around the stack of envelopes and then picked out the package which Silk had mailed.

Though he watched narrowly, Silk could not see that Morgan betrayed any undue surprise. He simply thrust the package into his coat pocket, heedless of the bulge it made, and ambled out.

Silk gave him about two minutes, then followed. He picked up Morgan's trail easily. The man walked rapidly along the busy street and Silk, far in the background, felt reasonably secure. Morgan turned into a cafeteria, tipped his hat to the blond cashier and selected a table in a far corner. He placed his stack of mail on the table, took the package from his pocket and put that on the top. Then he picked up a tray and started serving himself at the food bars.

SILK was outside the restaurant, but he could watch every movement the insurance agent made. He kept his eyes on the package. A white-coated bus boy, tray full of dirty dishes, approached the table while Morgan was busy at the counter. He swabbed the table and Silk saw one of the cleverest sleight of hand tricks it had been his privilege to observe in years.

A package, the exact counterpart of the one that Silk himself had mailed, deftly replaced the original. The bus boy slipped the one he had stolen into a hip pocket that seemed to have been especially created to receive the bundle.

When Morgan returned to his table, he saw nothing amiss. Butch sidled up to Silk without showing any recognition. Silk's lips barely moved.

"Bus boy, now cleaning table in west corner.

Watch service entrance of restaurant. Trail him. Send Carol over."

Butch leaned against a hydrant, inserted a wooden match between his lips, chewed on it thoughtfully for a moment, then ambled off. It was done with a neatness and dispatch only rivaled by the way that bus boy had switched packages.

Carol came along two minutes later. To her Silk gave other orders.

"That smooth little guy just getting up with the mail in his hand. Watch out—he's slippery. Carry on."

Carol paused to look in the window of a hat store. When Morgan emerged, she turned away and followed him. Silk waited another minute, then went into the restaurant.

He walked up to the blond cashier and didn't blame Morgan for giving her the eye.

"Mr. Morgan of the Security Insurance Company promised to meet me here," he murmured. "I don't know him. Will you point him out?"

The girl said, "Sorry, Mister. He just went out this minute. Say, didn't I see you in front of the window a minute or two ago? Why just think, he was in here—right over in that corner—and you were out there,"

Silk clucked his tongue. "Think of it. Now that you mention it, I do remember seeing a handsome man at that table in the corner. He left his mail on the table when he went for his food. I thought it most careless of him."

The cashier flashed Silk a knowing look.

"Well, he does that every day, just the same. I sort of keep my eye on his mail, but there ain't no crooks around this rest'runt, Mister. We run a decent place. His mail is just as safe on the table as if a mailman had it."

Silk gave her a big smile and tipped his hat.

"I can readily see that, or you wouldn't be working here. Well, I'll catch up with Morgan later on. Thank you very much."

So Morgan made a habit of leaving his mail on the table. It was too damned careless a gesture to be on the level. He was getting rid of that recording, without actually contacting the agent who came for it.

Silk began walking rapidly in the direction which Carol had taken.

CHAPTER XIII
A Nice Old Lady

WHEN Silk met Carol, she was coming back in a rush. She stopped him deliberately.

"Silk, we've got to chance an open contact like this," she said hurriedly. "I—don't know what to do. That awful man, Antal, is in the lobby of the insurance building. When Morgan went in, I saw Antal watch ever so carefully. I think he's up to something."

"I think they are in cahoots if you should ask me, Miss Carol," Silk said. "Morgan just passed that recording to a pal. Did it mighty neat, too."

Carol's hand gripped Silk's forearm. "That isn't the worst of it. Sergeant McGrath is also, watching the building. And Antal has several men parked outside. It looks to me like a kidnapping and if McGrath tries to stop them, he'll be killed!"

Silk said "O-o-o-h !" very slowly, then went on: "McGrath is a nuisance, but I know the master wouldn't want him hurt. Here's the angle: you tell the master. Don't use a phone. Go to the house personally. I'll watch out here. If anything happens, I'll phone. Have to take the chance. Run along now."

Silk ambled toward the insurance company's massive structure. He saw McGrath across the street, eyeing the place suspiciously. Silk knew what McGrath was after. He had become just as suspicious of Morgan and Tunick as he was of the Black Bat. The policies of the murdered men had not been distributed to enough companies. Practically all of them were insured by Tunick's firm. Either someone was making a sucker out of Tunick or the president of the firm was milking his own business to the tune of millions.

Silk had seen the morning papers. The list of murders increased almost hourly, with the police working with frantic speed to uncover something—anything—so the newspapers would be satisfied. Five minutes after Silk took up a concealed post where he could watch proceedings, a woman of about sixty came out of the building. Tightly clutched between her wrinkled fingers were several documents that looked like insurance policies. She was dressed in mourning and the lines of her wrinkled face showed that she had suffered severely in the immediate past. She was such a simple soul, even trying to smile through her tears, that Silk, who knew every angle of the sob sister business, realized that she couldn't be a fraud. She was much too genuine.

Then he saw Antal emerge and give a covert signal. The car full of his gunmen began moving slowing down the street. Silk burst out into a sweat of horror. They were after the old woman. They were going to snatch her.

Suddenly another complication arose. McGrath had straightened up. He knew Antal, had recognized him as a wanted man, and was swinging into action. Silk saw him reach for his service pistol. There was going to be a gun battle and that old lady would be in the middle of it. Silk caught a hard breath and began running.

At that moment, Sergeant McGrath let out a lusty yell for Antal to stop. The gaunt killer turned with a snarling curse. McGrath rushed toward him, but in his concentration on the killer, McGrath missed the slowly moving car filled with gunmen.

Antal's lips parted in a sardonic scowl and he raised his hands. McGrath drew out handcuffs and approached Antal warily. Two men jumped out of the car. Both held clubbed guns. A pedestrian screamed. McGrath, caught between two fires, started to bring his gun down to stop the advancing killers.

ANTAL swung into action then. His big fist struck McGrath at the nape of the neck. The doughty detective sergeant swayed like a drunken man and hit the sidewalk. Instantly the two gunmen picked him up, dragged him to the car and hurled him into it. A police whistle shrilled somewhere and Antal began racing toward the old woman who had drawn back against a store window to get out of harm's way.

Silk met Antal with a terrific thump. It seemed like an accidental collision to any observer, but Silk's two fists smashed a pair of healthy blows to Antal's belly. The gaunt killer let out a roar of pain, swayed around, gripping his middle and emitting a string of curses.

A patrolman swung around a corner and Antal hesitated, torn between the desire to snatch the old lady or run for it. He decided on the latter. So far as he could see, no one had suspected his intentions and the old lady could wait until a more opportune time. Antal jumped into the moving car and it roared away, taking the next corner on squealing tires.

Silk moved to the old lady's side and tipped his hat.

"A nasty rumpus, madam," he said. "I can see how it has affected you. May I offer you a lift?"

The old lady clutched at Silk's arm. "Oh, yes, you're so kind. Why, I—thought for a moment that I was really going to be hurt. That awful looking man seemed to be coming for me. Of course it's just my imagination, but I'm so upset—"

Silk piloted her to a taxi. He did not ask where she lived. That could come later. Silk's mind was reeling under the swift turn of events. While he hated to let McGrath be kidnapped, he would have hated himself more if anything happened to this kindly old lady. McGrath was a police officer, paid and trained to face danger. This woman would be as helpless as a two-weeks-old babe in the hands of men like Antal.

Silk changed cabs twice, watching carefully, to see that he was not followed.

"Just a habit of mine," he explained away his actions. "I like to ride and I like taxi drivers. By changing I'm able to give them all a little business."

Silk gulped and called himself a fool. If she swallowed that line, she was as naive as any person he'd ever met. She swallowed it all right.

"That's very kind of you. But you don't even know where I live, but it really isn't much further. I can walk."

Silk shook his head. "I wouldn't think of it. I'll see you right to your door, madam. If I'm not too inquisitive—you've lost someone dear, haven't you?"

She smiled wanly. "My grandson—Charlie's boy. He was hit by a car only day before yesterday. The funeral is tomorrow—from the undertaker's chapel. Now I'm all alone except for another grandson. My daughter's boy. But let me tell you who I am. You've heard of Arnold Bannister? I'm Beulah, his widow."

Silk almost jumped off the taxi seat. Beulah Bannister was a comparatively wealthy woman. Her late husband, a tire manufacturer, had left her comfortably well off. No wonder Antal had laid crafty plans to snatch her.

Then Silk thought of those papers the old lady held tightly in her hand. Silk knew how to handle people of her kind. All the old polish and suaveness of his confidence man career oozed out of every pore.

"I'M SO SORRY," he said gently. "My name is Smith. I lost my dear ones years ago. If I could only be of some help to you. Oh, I know you have attorneys and men who would fight to get a part of your money, Mrs. Bannister. That's not my way. I like people for themselves. By the way—those papers in your hand. They look valuable. Hadn't you better place them in your purse? Here let me do it."

She surrendered both her purse and the papers. Silk folded them once, but his keen eyes ran over the details on the title page of the first documents. He closed his eyes and shook his head. This old lady's grandson had been insured against accidental death to the tune of two hundred thousand dollars—and that was only one of the insurance policies she held!

A servant ran out to open the taxi door. The woman shook hands with Silk and bestowed a friendly smile on him.

"I won't ask you in now, Mr. Smith. Things are so off balance, with the boy's death and all. I would appreciate your coming to tea some afternoon—in about a week. I won't mind, you see. We are old people, you and I. We've grown to expect death, even if it comes to our dearest ones and not ourselves. I won't be impairing the boy's memory if

you come for a friendly chat some afternoon. Goodbye—and thank you ever so much."

After she left, Silk found that his eyes were moist. Then, to the amazement of the taxi driver, he snapped a searing oath.

"If they've got plans to harm that old lady, I'll wring their filthy necks," he told himself. Then aloud, "Driver, take me to Union Station."

At home, waiting for Silk, Tony Quinn paced the narrow confines of his laboratory nervously. Delay irritated him and he should have heard from Silk hours ago. It wasn't like Silk to permit so much time to pass unless something had happened to him. Something he could not get out of.

Then there was McGrath. Despite the bulldog tenacity he used in trying to connect Tony Quinn with the Black Bat, Quinn liked him for it. McGrath lent a certain spice of excitement to life. And he was honest, fair and as good a policeman as existed.

Carol had arrived with her information and departed to hurry back to the insurance company building and watch for further developments. Suddenly the signal light, wired to the front porch, winked to indicate someone was approaching the door. Quinn picked up his cane, assumed the staring gaze of a blind man and hurried back to the living room. But it was only Silk who arrived. Silk, as alarmed as Quinn had ever seen him.

"Have things happened!" He doffed his hat and slipped out of the disguise. "No need to worry about McGrath watching, sir. He's been snatched—taken by Antal and his gunmen. Where? I don't know, sir. There was an old lady—charming person. Antal was ready to snatch her when McGrath butted in. I hustled the old lady off and who do you think she was?"

"Stop asking riddles," Quinn said tartly. "I've got to find McGrath. Oh, I'm sorry, Silk. I know you did the right thing in protecting the woman. Out with it. Who was she?"

"Mrs. Beulah Bannister—and her grandson died yesterday, hit by a car."

Silk paused, and a horrified expression came over his face, "I—I just thought of something, sir. The grandson was killed by a car. He was insured for over two hundred thousand dollars. She was cashing in on his policies. Oh, what a sap I've been! She must be part and parcel of the gang."

QUINN whistled thoughtfully. "Maybe, Silk. But it doesn't sound quite right to me. We'll have to look into it."

Silk looked puzzled. "The death of her grandson does smack of these devils who operate the insurance racket. Only I—I can't see how they'd have any hold on her, sir. She's such a nice old lady. She did mention another grandson, her daughter's boy. He's all she has left."

Quinn rubbed his chin. "We'll have to watch her, Silk. Maybe for her own protection. But first I must find McGrath before they kill him. They'll take their time about it and try to find out what McGrath has up his sleeve. He won't talk, so he won't be murdered at once. But we've lost the trail. Carol told me about the package and the bus boy. I haven't heard from Butch yet, but he'll report as soon as he knows anything. But we must find McGrath, then investigate the death of Mrs. Bannister's grandson. Silk, I believe we're beginning to close in. If I have my way, the rest of the innings will be ours."

Silk went to his rooms to completely eradicate the disguise.

It was an hour later when the phone rang. Silk answered it and stiffened to attention. Butch was calling, so excited that he could hardly talk and complicating things by pretending he was the manager of a laundry calling.

"The bundle you reported—Mr. Quinn's—well, it—it's gone. It must have been diverted to some other address, see? Maybe the party at two-three-five-six Boulevard Drive got it by mistake, see? I'm gonna find out if that's what happened, see? And I'm busy—gotta be traveling, see?"

Silk hung up quickly. He raced into the living room, but Tony Quinn, in his pose of a blind man, did not turn a hair.

"It was Butch—he disguised the call. He mentioned the address at two-three-five-six Boulevard Drive, see? I mean—sir." Silk blushed at the slip of the tongue.

Quinn grinned broadly.

"Butch evidently imparted some of his excitement to you, Silk. Anyway it's what I've been waiting for. And, damn it, I must keep on waiting. It will be dark within an hour. I must restrain myself until then. It won't be safe for me to prowl around until I'm in my own element—darkness. Get some coffee, Silk. And see to my guns. I've a feeling they'll go into action tonight."

CHAPTER XIV
To Save a Policeman

JUST as soon as it was dark enough to venture out, Tony Quinn's personality slipped from him. Gone were the stark, staring eyes of a blind man. His resigned, almost morose look vanished.

As the Black Bat he became alive and alert. His nerves were tingling, his eyes shining brilliantly.

He gave Silk instructions to contact Carol at

once and have her call on old Mrs. Bannister. She was to ingratiate herself in the old lady's favor by some pretext or other. Carol could decide the circumstances, for she was clever enough to know where to draw the line. She was to be armed and ready for trouble. At the first sign of developing danger she was to call the police and stand by Mrs. Bannister.

"And you, Silk, will have to chance a caller here at this house. If anyone comes, we went for a drive and I'm walking alone in the park. Remind me to make a habit of that when we're not busy on some case. It's a good alibi and we need 'em. Conceal yourself and watch both Mrs. Bannister and Carol. If that skinny Antal shows up and tries to strike, shoot him. It's the only way to handle cornered rats. I'm depending on you, Silk, old man."

Quinn drew on the floppy hat, slid down the ladder to the tunnel and in five minutes was behind the wheel of the car that Butch kept parked for his convenience.

He headed west and turned up Boulevard Drive. The name was more or less facetious for it was nothing like a boulevard. There were no trees at all—only dirty factory smokestacks rearing their heads above the squalid tenement houses, most of them empty because of government housing projects being carried out in the vicinity.

The number Butch had given proved to be a boarded-up old place that looked as though a good windstorm might blow it down. The Black Bat drove right by the place, slowly, for he knew that Butch was somewhere in the vicinity and would recognize the car.

Ten blocks away, the Black Bat turned around and came back. Before he neared the house, Butch jumped from a place of concealment and waved his hand. The Black Bat stopped and picked him up.

"There's five of 'em," Butch reported excitedly. "I tailed the bus boy from the restaurant to this joint, and I been watchin' the dump ever since they dragged McGrath inside. Boy, they sure didn't handle him gentle! That big punk, Antal, took an awful swipe at the poor guy—damn near knocked McGrath's head off—and all for nuthin'."

"We'll give them a taste of their own brand of medicine," the Black Bat decided. "You have my permission to knock as many of their heads together as you can. With one stipulation. Antal belongs to me."

Butch made a wry face.

"I knew they was a catch to it, Chief. I been wantin' to bust that guy ever since I first laid eyes on him. But how do we start? They got a couple of hoods parked at windows upstairs and they got tommy guns. I know, because even if the windows are all boarded up, they got 'em on hinges so they swing out. They loosened them for quick shootin' and the wind banged it wide open. I saw the stutter gun, see?"

"I think that we'll steal a police car," the Black Bat said judiciously. "Under the circumstances—rescuing a police officer and all—we should feel free to use department equipment. What do you think, Butch?"

BUTCH'S jaw hung slackly down. "Sure, chief, sure—anythin' you say. But a police car—what are we gonna do with it? Drive it through the front door?"

The Black Bat grinned. "No, but we'll use it to drive those mugs to the front door. Keep your eye peeled for a radio car. And, Butch, be gentle with the patrolmen that we'll have to put out of commission temporarily."

Butch's grin spread all over his face.

They picked up a radio car in an outlying section, trailed it to a call box where one patrolman got out and phoned in. As he walked back to the car, he heard a shout from behind one of the houses that lined the street. It was distinctly a call for help.

"Let's go, Bill!" he snapped. "Sounds like trouble."

They left the car at the curb and raced down the street. A man was standing in a driveway waving his hands excitedly. They rushed up to him.

"There's a dead guy in my garage," Butch gulped. "I just went in and there he was, all—"

"Where?" both patrolmen chorused.

Butch pointed and they headed for the place. They took, perhaps, three steps before two massive hands gripped each man by the nape of the neck. Butch raised both of them off their feet and before either could gather his wits, he banged their heads together. Then Butch put them down carefully, found their handcuffs and used both pairs to cuff wrists and ankles.

He tied efficient gags between their lips and carried them to the garage which the Bat had discovered to be as vacant as the house it belonged to, Butch put both men down, arose, and then bent down again to loosen their collars. They seemed a little blue in the face. Butch made a sympathetic sound with his tongue.

"Too bad. Imagine how them babies are gonna feel."

Then he closed the garage door, snapped a rusty padlock in place and ran to the street. The radio car pulled up with the Black Bat at the wheel. He sent it roaring back to Boulevard Drive and parked at an intersection. There the Black Bat fell to work with a screwdriver, a wrench and a pair of pliers. Butch watched him mutely, unable to understand what all this fuss had to do with rescuing McGrath.

At last the Black Bat was finished. He set the dashboard clock carefully, tested a few wires and then drove the car to within twenty feet of the apparently abandoned tenement, traveling the last couple of blocks without lights. He shut off the motor, signaled Butch to work quietly and both slipped out of the car, darted between two of the old tenements and reached the squalid courtyard in the rear. The Black Bat spoke low-voiced warnings from time to time, and saved Butch several nasty falls over sagging clotheslines and tin cans.

"We've got two minutes," the Black Bat announced in a whisper. "Butch, you can't see him, but there's a man in the second floor window. That's where they'll be—on that floor. Now, here is the idea. They'll all rush to the front of the house. When that happens, I'll climb the porch and get in that window from which a gunner is now peeking. Those boards will be on a hinge, as you indicated. I'll get in easily. As soon as I vanish, you count up to fifty—slowly. Can you count that high?"

"Huh!" Butch said. "I can go as high as a hundred. Okay. Then what?"

THE Black Bat smiled and drew his hood over his shoulders.

"Then you see what can be done about that locked door. Take it apart and go to town, Butch. No shooting unless absolutely necessary. There will be plenty of excitement without that. Ready?"

Butch had no time to reply. From the street came the sudden wail of a siren. It grew and grew in intensity until the eerie screech seemed to enter their blood. The Black Bat, watching the window above carefully, saw the gunman vanish. Although there was no more than a two-inch crack in the boards, the Black Bat was able to spot the guard's movements.

"Now start counting!" he ordered Butch in a whisper.

The Black Bat rushed across the yard, gave a leap and wound both arms around a porch pillar. He shinnied himself up expertly, reached the porch roof and darted for the window. He pulled back the boards that were nailed to what was practically a storm window, and stepped inside. Whipping out his gun he looked through the darkness. There was no one in the room.

Hurrying on, he reached a long hallway off which several empty apartments led. From the front of the house he could hear harsh orders being given in Antal's raucous tone.

"Each man take a window and use them tommy guns," the gaunt man was saying, "Blast as many of the police as you can. I'll take care of this wiseguy headquarters man in the back. Remember, make your slugs count. Drive 'em back and then we'll smash out of the cellar where the car is hidden. It's a damn lucky thing we were set for this but I'd give my shirt to know how the police spotted this joint."

The siren was wailing away at a great clip. It sounded as though a hundred radio cars were converging on the scene. Echoes of empty buildings can give deceptive sounds.

The Black Bat merged with the darkness and waited. In a second or two Butch would come barging in. That would be the giveaway. The Black Bat saw Antal, his gaunt, skinny frame plainly visible in the darkness as he hurried toward one of the tenements. A heavy pistol was in his hand and murder was in his eyes.

Antal pushed open the door, hurried into a bedroom and stood over McGrath. The detective sergeant's face was the color of raw beef from the slugging he had taken, Somebody had taken off his clothes which were draped over a nearby chair and he was in bloody pajamas too small for him. Blood caked his lips and matted his hair. But his eyes were defiant.

"So they caught up with you, Antal," he said coolly. "And you're about to gun me. That won't do you much good. You're slated for the chair and it's little matter if it's for my murder or someone else's. You've killed enough men in your day."

"So," Antal snarled. "Still wise, huh? Okay—I'll give it to you right in the belly so you'll be in misery for days and then you'll croak anyway. Maybe they'll get me, but you'll die, wiseguy."

Antal pointed his gun down towards the man on the bed. His finger tightened against the trigger. Suddenly he became aware that one of the hinged windows had opened. A gray sort of light had drifted into the room. Antal raised his eyes—and felt the first wave of pure terror he had ever experienced.

Silhouetted against the further wall was the shadowy image of a giant bat, with wings outspread like great talons ready to close about its prey. In all his mad career, Antal had never seen anything more sinister.

HIS hand holding the gun trembled. His whole body broke out in a cold sweat. Palsied fingers let

go of the gun and it clanged to the floor. He felt a cold breeze—like the wings of death—fan the back of his neck. Antal opened his mouth for a convulsive scream of terror. But a black-clad arm circled his neck, snapped his head back, and a fist crashed against the point of his jaw.

As Antal lapsed into unconsciousness, he vaguely heard a terrific crashing sound. Butch had broken in the door.

Thugs, torn between the desire to protect themselves from the front or to see what was going on in the rear, gave way to panic. They fled for the cellar, but their paths crossed with that of Butch.

A tommy gun spat once, a brief round. The thugs were slammed mercilessly against walls, or picked up and swung like clubs to crash against the heads of their own mates.

Butch was in action and he loved every minute of it. Big, brutal as only Butch could be when aroused, he moved about with amazing speed.

Upstairs the Black Bat knelt beside McGrath.

"They didn't handle you any too gently, Sergeant," he said. "Please bear with me if I have to be quick. That devil's din outside is bound to draw a lot of police and I don't care to meet any more than you, many thanks just the same."

McGrath's face was a study in contrasts. One moment he looked as though he would like to tackle the Black Bat, weak and hurt as he was. The next he looked as though he would like to hang a medal on his chest and shake his hand.

From below came Butch's hoarse bellow.

"All clean, Chief!"

"Beat it!" the Black Bat called back. "Travel fast."

Butch did not pause to question the Black Bat's methods. He scurried out into the backyard and leaped over a fence. In half a second he was gone from sight.

Antal pointed his gun down toward the man on the bed.

The Black Bat stripped off the tight wires that bound McGrath. The detective sergeant tried to arise, but his arms and legs were temporarily paralyzed. He groaned and sank back on the floor. The Black Bat hastily stripped off the pajamas and somehow managed to get him in his clothes, then lifted him, like a child. He headed for the door. Antal, on the floor, groaned and clawed at the wall near him.

"That guy," McGrath said. "He's wanted. Wisconsin wants him on a charge of murder and I want him to resist arrest so I can paste his nose around to the back of his rotten head."

"Sorry," the Black Bat scampered down the stairs with McGrath slung over his shoulder. "Antal is the only man who will lead us to the real brains of this murder gang. I'm coming back for him."

CHAPTER XV
The Truce

HELPLESS, McGrath lapsed into silence.

There were sounds of activity in front of the house now. Other police cars, drawn by the howling siren, had arrived. The Black Bat dashed down the cellar steps and discovered a sedan down there, headed straight toward one section of brick wall. He put McGrath into the front seat of the car, ran over to the wall and made a quick examination.

"Looks like the real thing," he said as he slid behind the wheel, "but it's only lightly put together for just such an emergency. Hang onto your hat, Mac. Here we go! I haven't time for Antal now, because he won't do me any good if those police arrest me."

The sedan shot forward just as Antal stumbled into the cellar. He saw the car crash through the wall as though it had been made of flimsy paper. Bricks toppled from masonry purposely put together with weak cement. The car ripped a vast hole through the wall, turned in the rear yard and headed down the driveway.

There were several shots, and shouts for the car to stop. Antal began running. He, too, went through that hole and vanished into the darkness before police could surround the place.

"Fine thing," McGrath grumbled as the sedan shot between the thin line of patrolmen. Bullets smacked against the bulletproofed glass window. "Me, running from my own men. But you're headman, Bat. I'm in your hands and I didn't qualify that statement at all."

"Thanks for having faith," the Black Bat answered.

"Hell!" McGrath snapped. "It's not that. My arms and legs won't move. Those wires cut off all circulation. Say, what siren was that anyhow? The boys didn't show for ten minutes after it started to wail."

The Black Bat chuckled. "I swiped a radio car, arranged the wiring to the dash clock and set it so that the siren would go off after I had time to slip into the house. It drew the guards away from the rear."

McGrath could not conceal his feelings.

"Nice work," he complimented. "And believe me I never thought I'd be handing out any compliments to the Black Bat."

The Black Bat lost any chance of pursuit, for this sedan had plenty of power under her bullet-dented hood. Finally he turned off the road and up a quiet lane. He stopped the car and doused the lights.

"Like a couple of sweethearts on Lover's Lane, Sergeant," he said gleefully. "But we'll talk instead of neck. You've got to be reasonable for the time being. We're in this together or I'd never have bothered to save you from Antal and his precious mob."

"It's a truce," McGrath agreed. "But it only lasts until we finish this talk, get me? After we part this time, I'll hunt you down, Bat. I'll track you down if I'm old and feeble when I finally land you. Go ahead—what do you want to know?"

The Black Bat rolled down a window. He regarded McGrath intently a moment. Then he said:

"We know an insurance murder ring is in operation. We know that a great number of people have been killed so their insurance could be collected. We know that Antal is first lieutenant for some warped-brained monster who wants to roll in wealth at the expense of as many human lives as becomes necessary. That's all—so far. Have you any ideas?"

MCGRATH shook his head.

"Nothing but a lot of suspicions that peter out every time we try to get something concrete."

"What about Dr. Luddy and Paradon, that shyster attorney?" the Black Bat asked.

McGrath emitted a whistle of surprise.

"So you did pay Dr. Luddy a visit! We thought he was off his track. I don't know about him. We once suspected he might be back of a big drug syndicate, but the Federal boys cleaned up the mess and there were no ties to Luddy. Paradon—I didn't even know he was interested, but that's something to work on. That guy would gyp his grandmother out of her admittance card to a home for the aged."

"What of Peter Galvin?" the Black Bat asked. "Has he been approached again? He was paid that

policy and Antal certainly wanted to lay his hands on the check."

"He's staying undercover," McGrath said. "We've got four men posted around his house. If Antal shows there, he'll get his head blasted off. And is Galvin sore? Says we're interfering with his happy homelife. Say, that guy hasn't had a happy home since he found out there were such things as blondes. And say, we found a torpedo named Collins in that house where you battled yesterday. He was shoved in a closet. Somebody put a gun right against the back of his head and let him have it. Know anything about that?"

"Antal, Sergeant. He received his orders to kill him." The Black Bat sighed. "Our little conference has come to naught, Sergeant. I leave in your hands the guarding of Galvin and his family. We'll go back to town now and I'll drop off at a convenient spot."

McGrath was massaging his hands slowly. Without looking up, he spoke:

"Okay. But don't get any funny ideas that I'll stop trying to run you down. I'm grateful for the way you risked your neck to save mine. I—I guess I've never said that to anybody before. Just the same I mean it. And—I don't think you killed that hoodlum we found lashed to the cemetery fence. I don't think I ever believed it, but sometimes it helps a guy's ego along if he thinks the worst of his—er—enemies."

"I didn't kill him," the Black Bat said sincerely. "I left him there, tied, and with one of my calling cards pasted on his forehead. The man who murdered him also murdered Lew Scott, Assistant Coroner Crawford and Jim Fisher. He killed them so they wouldn't expose the operations of the insurance ring. Ralph Galvin's body was spirited away and a stranger put in his place. However, I know that young Galvin was poisoned—with arsenic. You slipped up there, Sergeant. One of the three men who were killed concealed an envelope with a tuft of hair snipped from Galvin's head. It showed that there was plenty of arsenic in his system."

"Hmmm," McGrath muttered. "So you're a chemist along with other things. Very well. We part when you say so and then the truce is over. I won't meet you under circumstances like these again because, after all, I am a law officer with an oath of office to uphold. You're a criminal—an outlaw."

The Black Bat laughed and nosed in to the curb.

"This is a nice desolate spot and not so far from civilization that you'll get flat feet in walking back. Also it will prevent you from contacting Headquarters and throwing out a dragnet for this car."

MCGRATH got out.

"Thanks again," he said. "I'm grateful. Two minutes—two minutes, hell—two seconds more and I'd have been dead. I still think you made a mistake in letting Antal go. He's bound to keep undercover from now on."

"Antal"—the Black Bat leaned out of the car a trifle—"will watch himself, but I happen to know that he will also show his fine hand soon. He's got to, and I also know where he'll strike. Good night, Sergeant. And happy hunting for—the Black Bat."

In the rearview mirror the Black Bat saw McGrath start hiking, shaking his head from side to side like a sorely puzzled man. But the Black Bat had no notions about McGrath relaxing his vigilance. If anything, he would stick closer than ever to the Black Bat's trail.

Butch was impatiently waiting in the secret laboratory when the Black Bat reached his own home. He slipped out of his encompassing black clothing and donned his usual gray tweed trousers, his white shirt with a gay bow tie and the smoking jacket. He tamped a pipe full of tobacco, lit it and leaned back comfortably.

"What happened to McGrath?" Butch asked. "Didn't he put up an argument?"

"With the man who saved him from death?" The Black Bat laughed. "No, Butch, we had a truce, but it's ended now. He may even call here to see if Tony Quinn is home, but the signal will warn me if he or anyone else approaches."

Butch scowled. "I know McGrath's got a right to live, see? But he's out to get you. All we did was save him so he could keep on lookin'. But"—Butch's face lighted up—"did I have fun! Say, one of them bozos figured he could knock me cold with a right to the jaw. I just stuck out my chin and let that bird paste me. I didn't blink. But he did—when I banged his noggin against one of them fancy stairway posts. Busted it, I did—the post, I mean. What's next, Chief?"

"Sleep for you, Butch. And don't get me wrong. Rescuing McGrath was the only decent thing we could have done. And it did provide me with something to chew on. Without knowing it, he gave me a tip. A meager one, but enough. We'll see if it grows to man-size before we sail in. Good night, Butch. Stand by for orders in the morning."

Butch ambled over to the hidden door like some well pleased Great Dane. He did not bother to use the ladder leading into the tunnel. He just jumped. After all, it was not more than two feet deeper than Butch's own hulk.

When he was gone, Quinn picked up his cane and went into the living room. He sat down and permitted that staring look to come over his eyes like a film. He was blind Tony Quinn again, the ex-district attorney who had been rendered wholly useless to the world by the cowardly actions of a gangster.

He was still seated there, intent on the problems circling through his mind, when he heard a tapped signal on the other side of the secret door. He arose and walked over to a window. Suddenly he raised it and although any watcher would have believed a blind man was just trying to get a breath of fresh air, the Bat was listening intently.

The slightest movement in the brush, the faintest breathing of an excited person hidden in the darkness, would have warned him. Satisfied that no one lurked outside, he closed the window, locked it and drew the shade. Casually he repeated the performance with all the other curtains. Then he went to the laboratory door, opened it and took both of Carol's hands.

DON'T know what I'd do without you, Carol," he said simply. "When there is brainwork to be done, I depend on you."

Carol smiled and pressed his hands warmly.

"You underestimate Silk, darling. He's doing a rather good job, too. And Butch—why he's as faithful as any man can be. But listen to what I've discovered. I went to Mrs. Bannister's—and Tony, she's the nicest old lady I've ever met. That boy who is to be buried in the morning—she lived for him. It was an awful blow, but she is transferring her affections to another grandson—Newman Recor, his name is. Her daughter's boy. Not that she didn't love him before. That woman loves everyone."

"Listen, Carol," Quinn said quietly. "Have this in mind as you tell me what happened. Mrs. Bannister will inherit a large sum of money by reason of her grandson's death. Granted that she is well off already, but some people don't know when to stop. Is she capable of planning murder for money?"

Carol's laugh warmed Quinn's heart. Laughter had gone out of his life before she entered it. He had lived in somber darkness until she came. Carol was like a tonic to him. His eyes, no longer filmed with the stare of the blind, told her this. She flushed just a little.

"Mrs. Bannister wouldn't kill a canary bird for a million dollars if she was starving to death. No, Tony, I give you my word that she is just as nice as she looks. But the grandson—Newman Recor. He is an undiluted heel."

Tony smiled. "I gather you don't like him. Who does he hang out with?"

"The only people who will have anything to do with him are those who want to profit by the spending money his grandmother gives him. Tony, I went to Mrs. Bannister and lied myself blue in the face. I hated to do it, but there was no other way and, after all, we are trying to help the poor old soul. I told her that her grandson, the one who is being buried in the morning, was in love with me and that we planned to be married. Do you know what she said?"

Quinn shook his head,

"That I could come and live with her, just as though we had been married." Quinn lit Carol's cigarette.

"What I'm getting at is this, Carol," he said. "If Mrs. Bannister profited by her grandson's death and he was murdered—of which I'm reasonably certain—then someone else wants to cut in on her money. That can be done only through an intermediary. Now if this other grandson you've described inherits her estate and he is under the domination of the man behind this murder ring—well, we've got something to work on."

CAROL'S eyes grew wide in horror. "You mean they'll deliberately kill that nice old lady? They'll murder her just so that nitwit of a grandson can get her money? Tony! No warm-blooded human being would do such a thing."

Quinn smiled crookedly.

"I'm not talking about warm-blooded, human beings, Carol. It's cold-blooded, merciless killers we're dealing with. Think! They've already killed thirty people that we know of so far. Would one more life make any difference? Not to them, and our aim is to stop them from carrying out their plans. Mrs. Bannister's fortune, increased largely by the insurance policies, would put them all on Easy Street, wind up their operations. She's a last resort, a final blow.

"But when they strike, we'll be waiting to take up some of the slack so Mrs. Bannister won't have to suffer. Phone Butch when you get back to your apartment. Tell him to join Silk and say they are to keep their eyes open. I'm making a little call about four A.M. when the going is clear. In the morning I'll prepare to outwit those killers and land them where they belong—in the electric chair."

CHAPTER XVI
Secret of the Recordings

DUMBLY Quinn helped Carol down the ladder. When she was gone, he called himself all kinds of a fool. He should have taken her in his arms and told her of the love that filled his heart.

Yet—he couldn't. The Black Bat's career was too hazardous, and if he slipped back into the old routine of Tony Quinn, blind man, he would cheat her out of the best part of life. Out of youth and romance and love.

He looked in a mirror at the hideous scars burned deep in his face, Carol was used to them, or even she would flinch. He had seen men do it; men

who did not know he could see. No, until the Black Bat's work was done Carol would be—just Carol There was no solution to this problem.

Quinn stumbled back into the living room and rested until it was time for him to act again. Then he donned the black clothing of the Black Bat, slipped out of the house and made his way by devious routes to the spot where he had parked Butch's car when they had hijacked the police radio cruiser.

He drove through the business canter of the city, now quiet and deserted, for it lacked only about two hours of dawn. Making sure that no patrolmen were in the vicinity, the Black Bat turned sharply and rolled down a delivery driveway to the rear of the Security Insurance Company's huge home office building.

Donning his hood he crept softly toward the service entrance. He got in easily, crouched in the darkness until he saw watchmen pass by on their rounds. Then he reached the stairway and went up it, making no more sound than a ghost.

He stopped in front of Ronald Tunick's private office, quietly forced an entrance and moved toward the big desk occupying one corner of the room. The fact that he needed no light in connection with his work helped greatly. Twice watchmen paced by the door without pausing. The Black Bat went to work swiftly. In one drawer which he skillfully unlocked he discovered a sealed package, similar in size and with the same brand of wrapping paper that had been used for the bundle sent by Antal. He shook it, heard the muffled thump of a record cylinder and proceeded to open the package carefully.

Removing a record, he thrust it into his pocket, then made his way to the office of Tunick's private secretary. There he found a dictaphone machine. He appropriated a record which he placed in the package instead of the one he had found there, then retied the package deftly until only close examination would show that it had been tampered with.

He went through the papers in Tunick's desk, found a personal checkbook and discovered that Tunick was overdrawn by almost five hundred dollars. A curt notice from the bank indicated that no more checks would be honored without a deposit.

Then, between the back pages of the checkbook, the Black Bat saw something that really made his eyes widen in surprise. It was a check made out to Peter Galvin for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars covering payment of his son's insurance policy.

The Black Bat turned it over. The check had been endorsed in favor of Tunick—for value received. He drew a sharp breath. What was this check doing here? Had Galvin after all paid over the check as demanded by the insurance ring? If so—

The Black Bat replaced the check and arose. He walked softly to the door, listened a moment, and when he was certain that the way was clear he slipped out.

HE reached his car without incident and got behind the wheel. As he felt for the starter button, he suddenly froze. High up on the side of the insurance company's building, a man was slowly being lowered from a window. He sat in what seemed to be a painter's chair. The descent was checked just outside what the Black Bat knew to be Tunick's private office. The man raised the window without any trouble and eased himself inside.

Ordinary sight would never have been able to follow the events of the next two or three minutes, but the penetrating power of the Black Bat's eyes enabled him to watch the intruder return to the window, stuffing a package into his shirt. Unquestionably it was the package containing the record that the Black Bat had left in place of the real one—which was now in the Bat's own pocket.

The man climbed into his precarious seat, waved a hand and was rapidly raised to another window two stories above Tunick's office. The Black Bat did not wait to see anymore. There was no question in his mind but that underlings of the murder ring had maneuvered this stealthy bit of burglary.

The Black Bat did not want underlings, and he had an idea that the record which he had appropriated might provide a lead to the man behind this grim business. Also there was no time in which to attempt a roundup of the men in that building. The moment it was discovered that the record was a fake, the whole gang might swing into action.

Driving back home, the Black Bat parked the car in the usual place and in the security of his laboratory, he went to work. First of all he made a careful examination of the record, checking it especially for fingerprints. But he knew that Antal and the man who paid him were both clever enough not to leave such significant clues. He found nothing on the record.

Then he went into another room, carried a playback machine into the soundproof laboratory and inserted the record. He turned on the machine and groaned aloud as the melody of an old air greeted him. The music was as ancient as the tune. Just another one of Tunick's collections.

But the Black Bat's methods were amazing in detail. He was certain that this recording was a message of some sort. He placed it on the laboratory bench and lined up several standard dictaphone cylinders beside it. First of all, he compared the records. There seemed to be no appreciable difference until he weighed them. The one he had taken from Tunick's office was almost fifty grams heavier than the others.

He used a pair of fine calipers to measure the

thickness of the records. Tunick's was thicker; only a matter of fractions, but bulkier nevertheless.

He took down text books and studied the composition of dictaphone records until he knew every process involved in their manufacture. Then he lit a Bunsen burner, held one of his own records in the flame for a second and nothing happened beyond a little smoke. He dared not risk their destruction by fire so he started an electric furnace and thrust the same record inside.

After five minutes he removed it with a pair of tongs. It was intact. Then he shoved Tunick's record into the furnace and through the glass window he saw an amazing transformation take place, The whole outside of the record seemed to melt and slide away like an orange peel. Quinn's breathing was fast as he fished the record out and wiped off the melted substance.

HE LET it cool and saw the tiny grooves inscribed on it by a recording machine. He knew now how Antal sent his messages without fear of detection. The real message was inscribed and overlaid with this substance similar to the record itself. Then the transcription of a genuine old record was put on it.

The man to whom the message was being sent had only to melt off the surface and play the recording underneath!

Quinn slipped the record on the machine, snapped the switch and Antal's raucous voice greeted him.

I advertised, as directed, in the personal columns of the Star-Chronicle *so you'd know I couldn't send these records through the usual source. One messenger, and his record, disappeared. I haven't been able to find out what happened, but I think the Black Bat had a hand in it. The record showed up today, mailed to the regular post office box just as I'd sent it. Morgan picked it up on schedule and it was lifted in the usual manner, but the bus boy brought it to me because he figured it was a setup. The Black Bat is working hard and he's busted up plenty of my boys. However I have five new gorillas coming in from Philly tonight and we're set to play the trump card. Things are ready at the old lady's. The kid is easy to play and fell for our line like the sucker he is. We get him an alibi, snatch the old lady and dump her in the bay. We'll make it look as though she either knocked herself off or fell in the drink by accident. The kid inherits and we take him for all he gets. Then his lights go out. I'm having one of my boys put this record in Tunick's office, as you instructed. It'll be done after hours, but if Tunick should happen to blow in, he'll just think it came in the regular mail. At dawn we take the old lady and clean up. I took care of Collins all right, but I think it was a mistake. He wasn't a snitch and I can't figure what he knew to make him so dangerous.*

The record ended and Quinn shut off the instrument. There were no windows in this laboratory and he hurried into the living room. Gray dawn was just filtering through the windows. Dawn! The zero hour when Mrs. Bannister was to be kidnapped and murdered!

Silk and Butch were on guard, true. But would they be able to stop the crime? Quinn had no time to lose. It would be mighty dangerous for the Black Bat to operate by day, but this time he had no choice, The murder ring was depending on cleaning up after this job. The millions in it would put them all in the financial high brackets.

He left his hood off, but drew the soft hat well down over his face to hide the scars, grateful that it was still too early in the morning for the city to have awakened.

He drove straight to Mrs. Bannister's mansion home. As he rode by it, he saw no sign of Silk, nor of Butch. The Black Bat's heart almost ceased to beat. Either of them should have recognized the car and given a signal of their presence.

It meant but one thing to the Black Bat. Mrs. Bannister had been already snatched and Silk and Butch were either on the trail, or had been kidnapped, too!

SILK, hidden in the darkness outside Mrs. Bannister's home, had welcomed dawn with sheer relief. Butch was parked on the other side of the house and he, too, would be grateful for the gray light. Now it would be much easier to watch.

Silk stretched, yawned, and tried to work off the chill that had settled in his bones. Then he paused. A car had stopped half a block up the street and he saw indistinguishable forms slip through the gray dawn toward Mrs. Bannister's house. Silk drew a gun and snapped off the safety. But when he saw that there were four men, he held his fire.

Butch also saw the approaching men but, like Silk, he kept undercover. Not that either man bothered to think of his own danger. It was Mrs. Bannister of whom they thought. This mob would strike fast if things happened. Silk groaned and wished the Black Bat were at his side.

Two of the men, with guns in their hands, took up a position on the front porch, concealing themselves from the street by standing behind high shrubs. The other two, with the gaunt Antal in the lead, stepped up to the front door, used a key and entered.

They were gone about three or four minutes and when they emerged Antal held old Mrs. Bannister cradled in his arms. By the way her arms and legs sagged limply, Silk knew that she was unconscious.

A wave of hatred such as Silk had never before known surged up within him. He drew a bead on one of the gunmen, but wisdom overcame pure impulse. Shooting would only endanger Mrs. Bannister's life now. The best thing was to follow and watch for the slightest opening.

One of the crooks gave a low whistle. The car, parked up the street, rolled to the curb in front of the house. Half a minute later it pulled away. The kidnapping had been done quietly and expertly.

Silk did not hesitate for a second. Racing toward the rear of the house, he signaled Butch to hurry, and tried to open the garage doors. Huge staples, held with padlocks, prevented him.

Butch grunted, pushed Silk out of the way and seized one of the locks. He heaved, his mighty shoulders bringing every muscle into play. Gradually he pulled the big staples out of the wood. He opened the door. Silk nodded his thanks.

"Find the Bat," he told Butch in a whisper. "Tell him what's happened, and act fast. I'll follow the car. When I find out where they are taking Mrs. Bannister, I'll phone. Beat it!"

Butch moved away. Silk climbed into Newman Recor's flashy roadster and prayed that he would not awaken anyone in the house when he tramped on the starter. The motor responded smoothly. Silk shot out of the garage, turned right, and saw the kidnap car vanish around a corner five or six blocks up the street. Silk took the next turn, came out on an avenue and picked up the trail.

It took him well out of the city and gradually he realized they were heading for the harbor. Silk gulped and broke out into a cold sweat. It was easy enough to steal a car, but if they went aboard some seagoing craft, he would be in a tough spot. Silk did not know much about sailing and stealing a boat was a little beyond his depth.

When the sedan slowed, turned, and entered a garage at the rear of a once exclusive yacht club, Silk stopped his own car and got out. He began running, veered to the left and reached the end of a pier. From there he could see that a trim yacht was tied up to the dock in front of the yacht club.

"Steam up?" Antal emerged, calling. "Good! We sail in two minutes."

CHAPTER XVII
Silk Is Trapped

UNEASILY Silk realized that he would have no opportunity to warn the Black Bat. There were no phones around, and he had only two minutes anyway.

Stripping off his coat, he kicked off his shoes and lashed his gun around his neck with his tie. Extra cartridges were in his trouser pocket and he did not believe he would be in the water long enough to spoil them. Climbing down a ladder, he slipped into the water. Never a strong swimmer, Silk kept close to the docks.

As he neared the yacht, he dived and swam underwater until he thought his lungs would burst. Then he bobbed up again and discovered that he was under the stern of the yacht. He seized a rope dangling overside and went up it like a monkey. There was no one on deck when he shoved his head over the rail. The crew was below, getting ready to sail.

Silk patted on bare feet across the deck, listened for a second at the companionway and when he heard nothing, he slipped down it, selected a cabin and hid in its narrow clothes closet.

Two or three minutes went by. He felt the ship tremble as engines throbbed. He heard voices and the sound of someone in the cabin. Silk pushed open the door a crack. Antal was placing Mrs. Bannister on the bed. Her wrists and ankles were taped with adhesive, but her eyes were open and shining in terror.

Antal strode toward the door.

"She'll keep," he growled. "One of you mugs stay outside this cabin and see that nobody gets in. We're heading out to sea until we're sure nobody is on our trail. I sort of have a feeling that house was being watched, and I'm taking no chances."

SILK spent the next five minutes in loading his cartridge clip with comparatively dry bullets. Then he crept into the cabin and tiptoed over to where Mrs. Bannister lay. Silk was in the same disguise he had assumed the day he had first encountered the old lady. She recognized him instantly and mild reproach shone in her eyes. Silk smiled at her reassuringly, bent down and put his lips against her ear.

"I'm not one of these crooks," he whispered. "I saw them take you and I followed. Don't be afraid! I'll get you out of this mess."

She moved her head up and down in a token of understanding Silk snapped a bullet into the magazine of his gun and went back to his hiding place. After a few moments he heard the cabin door open and his heart pounded with excitement. A man was slowly advancing toward Mrs. Bannister, a glittering knife held high. On his face was a scowl and his eyes shone with the light of murder.

Silk slipped out of the closet, gun ready.

"Slow up!" he said softly. "Drop that knife or I'll drop you."

Then, to Silk's horror, the would-be killer, turned around with a broad grin. Silk sensed his danger, turned his head and groaned. Antal and two of his men were crowded in the doorway, guns covering Silk. He had walked into a well-planned trap!

Antal strode forward. He wrenched the gun out of Silk's grasp and whipped him across the face with it.

"Of all the saps!" he exulted. "You swim out here, crawl on deck, and forget all about the nice trail of water you left behind. I figured you'd be hiding in here and you'd maybe be armed. So I framed this phony bump-off with a knife, because I knew it would draw you out. Now you'll go into the drink with the old lady. Only they'll find her floating around, and they won't find you because I'll put enough weights on your legs so you'll stand on the bottom of the ocean until you rot."

Silk said nothing. A little blood oozed out of the corner of his mouth from a badly cracked lip. The left side of his face was swelling rapidly as a result of the cowardly blow Antal had administered.

All he prayed for was one chance to take Antal by surprise. If he only could, Silk promised himself he would dispose of the gaunt, evil-faced killer for good.

Two of the crooks bound Silk hand and foot. He was flung on the floor and left there.

"Mr. Smith," a feeble voice called. "Mr. Smith."

Silk turned his head. He recalled that he had given Mrs. Bannister that name. She was looking at him sadly, but without a trace of fear.

"They are going to kill us, aren't they? You shouldn't have tried to protect me. I'm an old woman. Dying isn't so hard for me."

"We're not dead yet," Silk said savagely. "Something will happen. It's bound to."

But in his own mind Silk felt sure that they were both doomed. How could help reach them? No one knew where they were headed except Antal and possibly the captain of this yacht.

MRS. BANNISTER sighed in despair.

"I—I don't know what to think, Mr. Smith," she said tremulously. "My grandson's funeral is this morning. I can't understand why they took me away. If it's ransom they want, why don't they say so? I haven't much cash—my holdings are tied up in bonds—but I'll pay all I can."

Silk turned his head away. He did not want her to see his face for Silk realized what it all meant. There would be no ransom; not when they could murder her as easily as they could a two-day-old kitten. With her death proved, after her body was discovered, Newman Recor, her precious grandson, would come into the insurance money and the rest of her estate, and from him it would swiftly pass into the hands of whoever had directed this mad scheme.

Time dragged past. Then the cabin door opened. Two men stepped in. Both of them held rusty chains. They let them fall to the floor with a crash. Antal ambled into the cabin and eyed Silk with a fishy stare.

"I don't know what your angle in this business happens to be," he snarled, "and I don't care. Maybe you're a private detective set to guard the old woman; maybe you're from the police, or are a stooge for the Black Bat. I know you ain't the Black Bat because he's a bigger guy than you. Anyway, what's the difference? You're going overboard. Boys, drape them chains on his ankles and let's get started. There's a thick fog that will hide anything we do. Damned lucky we sailed into it."

Silk was turned over on his stomach. The chains were passed around the rope that lashed his ankles tight. He did not dare glance over to the bed on which Mrs. Bannister lay. It was tough enough dying without seeing the agonized expression that was bound to flood her wrinkled features.

Silk was dragged up on deck. Distantly he heard a ship's whistle hoot dismally as it sounded its way through the dense fog. The yacht was stopped and was drifting, her motors silent. Then a piercing shriek cut the fog—the high-pitched whirr of a siren aboard a police launch.

Antal turned pale.

"Dump this guy over! Hurry! Then heave the old lady into the drink. Me and the boys will take the launch back to shore. You members of the crew stick. Say Mrs. Bannister jumped overboard. Say she took a dive in the drink before you could stop her. Got all that?"

The man in the uniform of the captain nodded curtly.

"They'll never get wise," he mumbled. "And don't use the motor of the launch. Put those huskies of yours at the oars and muffle them with your coats. If the police hear you paddling, they may try to spot you. And you better hope this fog don't lift. I'll take care of all the rest of it."

Antal gave Silk a painful kick in the ribs. He motioned toward his men.

"Heave him over, then get the old lady. Snap it up!"

NEWMAN RECOR was about twenty-two, pasty-faced, underweight and plenty worried. He tossed uneasily in his sleep and finally opened his eyes. At that moment a hand dropped on his shoulder and the business end of a gun was centered over his heart. But it was not the gun that made Recor's heart crawl in terror. It was the man behind the gun.

"The—the Black Bat!" he gasped hoarsely. "Wh-what do you want?"

"Talk in a low voice," the Black Bat ordered. "No one knows I am here. Neither is anyone aware that your grandmother has been kidnapped. She was chloroformed. I found evidence of that in her

room. You are the one person who will profit by her death. You know who kidnapped her and where she is to be taken. Speak—you weak-kneed little toad! Where is she?"

"I—I don't know what you're talking about!" Recor gulped. "Did—did you say she was kidnapped?"

"Listen!" the Black Bat said with a trace of a snarl in his voice. "You know what's happened. Well, I also know one way to prevent men like Antal from cashing in on your grandmother's death. They intend to collect from you. If you're dead, your grandmother's estate will be disposed of to various distant relatives. In that way Antal and his mob will get nothing. So I could outwit him by killing you."

"No!" Recor cried. "No—don't kill me. I'll tell you what I know. They aren't going to kill her. Just take her to an island where she'll be safe until after I can get some of the estate, Everything is fixed for me to clean up quickly. Paradon—"

Recor's features went bleak at that slip of the tongue.

Paradon, was it? The Black Bat grimly decided that Paradon was going to have an opportunity to use his gift of gab in convincing the Black Bat of his integrity.

"Where is that island?" the Black Bat snapped. "What pier do they sail from and in what craft?"

"Roscoe Bleecher's yacht," Recor gulped. "He's away and the crew has been bribed. My grandmother has Mr. Bleecher's permission to use his yacht, and they're going to say she went for a sail and fell overboard. But she won't be harmed. They promised me that,"

"They're going to murder her," the Black Bat said stonily, "and make you the sucker. Can't you see, you stupid fool? By having knowledge of this mess you'll be guilty of murder as much as they are. They'll have you more under their thumbs than ever before. They'll bleed you of the entire estate. Now get up—walk over to that desk and draw me a map of the location of this island. Also write a description of that yacht. Hurry! We haven't much time."

A significant nudge of the gun and Recor jumped out of bed. Hastily he drew a crude map showing the location of the island, and scribbled a short description of the yacht.

The Black Bat swept up the piece of paper, stood before Recor a moment and delivered an unvarnished opinion of cowards. Then he stepped out the door, ran through the house and out into the rear of the estate. He cut through several other yards and reached his coupé.

There was someone inside. The Black Bat whipped out a gun. He moved closer, finger tight against the trigger. There was no time to be lost now. He would brook no interference from anyone, including Detective Sergeant McGrath.

BUT it was Butch who waited in the car. Butch clasping and unclasping his hands, heedless of the perspiration that dropped down his face.

"Boss!" he choked. "I thought you was never gonna show up! We musta crossed. I went to the house lookin' for you. Listen—Silk is tailin' Antal. He snatched the old lady. Silk said he'd call, but there ain't nobody to get his call now. I dunno what to do."

The Black Bat hauled out the map which Recor had drawn. It was crude enough to be almost undecipherable. He took a pencil from Butch's pocket and hastily wrote clearer directions.

"Take this," he instructed Butch. "Get it into Sergeant McGrath's hands as soon as possible, and without showing yourself. I've asked his help for the first time, but it's necessary now, for we must, to save Mrs. Bannister's life. He'll mobilize the harbor police and the Coast Guard cutters. We'll need every boat available to shove off and find the yacht before those devils murder her. Get going!"

CHAPTER XVIII
Murder on the High Seas

NODDING, Butch jumped out of the car and lumbered up the street. He hailed a taxi when he hit a main thoroughfare and was driven to the vicinity of Detective Sergeant McGrath's home.

Butch realized that if he showed himself, and McGrath got a good look at him, that he would be of little use to the Black Bat from then on. For McGrath would center all his attentions on running down Butch. Therefore he resorted to the only means he could devise to warn McGrath and at the same time remain anonymous.

Creeping around to the side of the suburban bungalow, he found the window to McGrath's bedroom, and hastily tied the message to a huge stone. He backed up, flung the rock accurately and sped away as it smashed through the window.

The Black Bat, meanwhile, drove to the dock where the yacht of Roscoe Bleecher, the wealthy sportsman, was usually tied up. He expected to see no trace of it and was not surprised to find it gone.

Looking around for some means of taking to the sea himself, he noted a private yacht club up the river a short distance. The Black Bat parked his car near the club, raced down the pier and quickly selected the fastest craft he could find—a sleek, high-powered racing boat, as swift a craft as rode any sea.

A watchman saw him, yelled an order for him to

stop, but the Black Bat had the motor sputtering before the guard could open fire on him. He gave her the gun and the prow of the little craft rose up out of the water while her motor hummed smoothly.

He let the craft out, heading down the river. A dense fog was closing in and the Black Bat swore softly. Fog would protect the murderers and hamper him and the police. That is, if McGrath acted in accordance with that written message—which he hoped the sergeant would.

GRADUALLY the fog closed in, deeper, more clinging. Then the shore was only a vague line. The Black Bat was far out now, and if the sea became rough, he would have a difficult time of it with this small craft.

Then he saw a vessel ahead—a trim white and brown yacht which he identified instantly as Bleecher's. He had only a glimpse of it before the fog closed down, hiding it from his sight. He heard a distant, dismal wail and then a high-pitched siren.

The Black Bat's jaw snapped shut with a click. McGrath had certainly lost no time. The police were closing in, too. This was going to be the riskiest assignment the Black Bat had ever encountered, for he would be caught between two fires—the police and the crooks.

The Black Bat cut off his motors suddenly. The momentum of his speed kept the small boat racing along until the bulk of the yacht loomed up. Dimly he made out several forms on deck. They were swinging an object, preparatory to hurling it overside. In a flash the Bat was on his feet, stripping off his hood, kicking off his shoes. Then he was diving into the sea, swimming with long, muscle-wrenching strokes.

There was a sinister splash about a dozen yards away. The Black Bat took a long breath and dived after it. He saw a murky object heading for the bottom. The Black Bat went after it like a fish, reached out and gripped the object firmly. Then he saw that the object was a man, and that heavy chains held him in a death embrace.

While his lungs clamored for air, the Black Bat went to work. Even as he and the man were heading fast for the bottom he had a knife out, slashing at the ankle ropes. The chains came loose. The Black Bat and the man he gripped began rising swiftly. As their heads cut the water, the Black Bat saw whom he had saved.

"Silk!" he sputtered. "Are you all right?"

Silk spat a mouthful of water.

"Ye–Yes!" Then he screeched: "Mrs. Bannister! They're throwing her over, too! She can't swim."

"You can," the Black Bat panted. "There's a little speedboat somewhere in this fog. Find it and have her set to run for it,"

The Black Bat clapped Silk on the shoulder, veered and began swimming back toward the yacht. Those aboard had no knowledge that Silk had been rescued. The thickness of the pea soup fog had kept that fact from them.

The Black Bat heard a scream that was suddenly muffled as though a giant hand had slapped across the victim's mouth. There was a splash. Something white hit the water and began to sink. The Black Bat dived again. In half a minute he had reached the side of the old lady. She was unconscious, probably from a brutal knockout punch. The Black Bat carried her to the surface, pillowed her head in the crook of an arm and floated, waiting for Silk to appear.

The yacht was getting underway again. He heard muttered oaths, then the sound of clumsily handled oars. The Black Bat had a vague glimpse of a speed launch. Antal and his band of cutthroats were deserting the yacht, leaving it to the crew to explain what had happened.

A hoarse voice bellowed an order for the yacht to heave to. Then a machine gun spattered the fog in a grim warning that the order was to be obeyed.

DRIFTING with the racing boat, Silk saw the Black Bat, with his burden, through the fog and came alongside. He helped take Mrs. Bannister aboard. The Black Bat clambered over the gunwale and quickly drew on his wet mask. He placed the old lady in a comfortable position and felt her pulse. It was none too strong.

"Full speed!" he called to Silk. "We've got to get this poor woman to a warm place. That will be up to you when we get ashore. I'll pilot this craft back to the pier where I stole it. My car is parked nearby and I'll try to reach it or lay low until darkness."

"But where will I take her?" Silk asked.

"To Carol's apartment. She's unconscious and she'll remain so for some time. Freshen your disguise, tell her it's your home, but don't tell her the address, and keep her in one of the back rooms where she won't be able to see the street. I'll be along as quickly as I can."

Silk swept the craft toward shore.

"But won't her people worry about her?" he asked.

The Black Bat's fists clenched.

"That's exactly what I want them to do. One person in particular."

Almost two hours later, the Black Bat entered his home through the secret tunnel. He found Silk smiling and happy.

"Mrs. Bannister is coming along fine," he reported. "I gave her a hot drink and Carol put her to bed. She thinks Carol is my sister, sir. She doesn't know where she is."

"Find me dry clothes."

Tony Quinn had stripped off the mask and hood. The last hour had been a precarious one for he had been forced to drive through traffic and take his chances on being stopped.

Silk got the clothing quickly—duplicates of the black outfit which Quinn stripped off. Quinn accepted a drink of brandy gratefully, downed it in easy stages and studied his problem from every angle.

"We're nearing the end of someone's rope," he told Silk. "The only trouble is direct evidence. There isn't any, and no chance to uncover any, it begins to look like. I've one ace in the hole, but it may turn into a deuce. We've got to consider several people. Take Tunick, for instance. Those recordings are mailed to him. He collects old phonograph records, which are similar to the modern dictaphone records. He even advertises for them.

"He may be doing all this just to be able to get the messages that Antal sends to his employer. Then Morgan picks up the records at the post office. Makes a practice of it. They are taken from him by stealth, but perhaps he knows this. Perhaps he sets the stage so they can be taken easily."

"I understand that." Silk frowned. "But what's the idea of them in the first place?"

"The leader of this insurance ring doesn't even admit his identity to his own men," Quinn explained. "I'm betting that Antal has no idea for whom he works. The loot is probably held in some safe place or shipped to the leader of the mob by some method as roundabout as they use for their messages. The head man can conceal his true voice and make no actual contact with his men. He's playing safe, Silk."

"What about this Dr. Luddy? He tried to hand you a double cross and anybody on the level would have worked with you."

TONY Quinn rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"It's puzzled me, that angle. And his calling in Paradon looks funny, too. We also have to consider everyone else connected with the case: Mrs. Bannister, her grandson Recor, and even Peter Galvin. There is so much at stake in this game that the most innocent person may prove to be the blackest."

Silk was facing a mirror and peeling off his disguise.

"What about grilling young Recor, sir? He must know something."

Quinn tapped his fingertips together thoughtfully.

"There is something else, Silk. Do this as soon as you are out of disguise. Take a cab, go to the offices of the *Star-Chronicle* and get me copies of each issue for the past two weeks. On your way back, tell Carol to leave Mrs. Bannister alone at eight o'clock. I'm going to call on her. She'll be able to stand the shock of seeing a masked man, won't she?"

Silk nodded. "That lady is tough—real pioneer stuff, sir. All she feels bad about is missing her grandson's funeral. I'll go directly, sir."

After Silk returned with a sheaf of newspapers, Quinn spent an hour reading the "Personal" columns and carefully checked the items. His lips parted in a slow smile as he inserted a fresh dictaphone record on his machine. He picked up the mouthpiece and began talking in a mechanical, disguised voice. This done, he carefully wrapped the recording, addressed it and called in Silk.

"There is still time to make the late editions of the *Star-Chronicle*," he told Silk. "Insert this ad for immediate publication. Then deliver this package. Meanwhile I'll pay Mrs. Bannister a visit."

An hour later, Mrs. Bannister started up in amazement when she saw the somber black-hooded man silently move before her range of vision.

"Please"—he held his hand toward her—"I'm not here to harm you, Mrs. Bannister. People call me the Black Bat. I assure you I mean only to help."

She relaxed and heaved a great sigh. "I—I've been through so much today, without really understanding what it was all about, that you did frighten me. But I'm not afraid of you. I can see your eyes through that mask. They are honest eyes and your voice has a ring of quality. How can you help me?"

The Black Bat sat down on the edge of the bed.

AN ATTEMPT was made to murder you today. Your grandson was killed in an accident only a short time ago. He was heavily insured. I have reason to believe that you were to be murdered so that the insurance on your grandson's life would go to your other grandson, Newman Recor."

"All very true so far," she agreed. "What's next?"

"Your living grandson has not had the best of companions. I believe he is under the domination of someone who has forced him to abet this kidnapping of you."

"Then you think my own grandson wanted to have me murdered?" she asked incredulously. "Nonsense! It's not true!"

The Black Bat bowed his head slightly.

"He might have believed you were only to be held temporarily, Mrs. Bannister. I'll tell you this much—he certainly aided me in finding you. Tell me, how much insurance was involved? What assets have you that are easily convertible?"

Mrs. Bannister leaned back and smiled.

"You'll be as surprised as the next man. I'm supposed to be fairly well off. I am—on paper. In actual cash I have only enough to live on—very well of course—but I can't throw my money away. My

grandson was insured for almost half a million dollars."

"And all of it with the Securities Insurance Company?" the Black Bat persisted.

Mrs. Bannister smiled, "Why not? I own half that company. My husband bought into it years ago. I've watched it grow from a small concern into one of the finest in the world. I don't publicize the fact that my only assets lie right in that company."

The Black Bat's eyes glittered. He arose.

"Thank you, Mrs. Bannister. You are in quite safe hands now and I suggest that you remain here until we have captured the man or men responsible for your narrow escape with death. Until we do that, your life will be endangered."

"I'll stay," she said. "I like it here. Most comfortable house I've ever been in, except for my own. And that Mr. Smith is so kind to me. Then the charming girl who says she is his sister, and isn't. They think they're fooling me. Well, they're not. Neither are you, crawling in through a window when you could have used the door as well as not."

The Black Bat's lips twisted into a grin. No wonder Silk had been smitten with this old lady. She was astute, keen-eyed and wholly lovable.

"You're guessing badly, Mrs. Bannister," he told her softly. "But I'm glad you'll stay. Perhaps in a few hours it will be quite safe for you to go home."

She sat up, very erect.

"Young man, that mask doesn't deceive me for one minute. Oh, I don't know who you are, I'll admit, but you are honest and I trust you. There is one favor—please?"

He nodded. "Anything."

She leaned forward and spoke in a confidential whisper to the Black Bat, "When you meet that awful skinny man they call Antal, slug him for me. He almost broke my jaw."

She sank back and watched the Black Bat step to the window and vanish as completely as a summer breeze. Her eyes sparkled.

"Remarkable young man. He'll teach that worthless grandson of mine a few manners, too." Then she closed her eyes slowly and added fervently, "I hope."

CHAPTER XIX
The Chase Closes In

EATING his hasty meal, Tony Quinn glanced through the other late evening newspapers that Silk had brought him. Silk took care that all curtains were drawn so that no one might observe a blind man avidly perusing the newspapers.

The evening editions told of Detective Sergeant McGrath's quick work in sending out harbor police launches and Coast Guard cutters to stop the yacht. The crew maintained that Mrs. Bannister had either fallen or jumped overboard before the yacht hove to after being signaled by a police boat. But Mrs. Bannister's body had not been found yet, though a thorough search had been in progress all day.

Commissioner Warner indicated that five new cases of murder for profit had been uncovered, all of the insured covered by Tunick's Security Insurance Company. There was a boxed item indicating that a meeting of the board of directors of the company was scheduled for this evening and the outlook was for a complete reorganization of the firm. Quinn scanned the list of directors and he gave a short gasp.

Dr. Lawrence Luddy was one of the more prominent members!

At ten o'clock, Silk, well disguised, ambled into the lobby of the insurance company building, took the elevator to the tenth floor and walked down six flights. He had a good look at the office two stories above Tunick's private office. He hurried back to the tenth floor, rang for the elevator and descended. The Bat was waiting in a car parked along a quiet, dark street.

"I got it, sir," Silk reported breathlessly. "And what a lead it's turned out to be. The office you said that guy on a bos'n's chair swung out of, to go down and get into Tunick's office, is rented to Attorney Paradon. His name is on the door in nice, new letters."

"Paradon," the Black Bat reflected, "Then he is in on it. Luddy must be, too. But he has a reason, being a director of the company. What on Earth are they after?"

"That's easy, sir," Silk broke in. "They're behind it all. They engineer these killings and they get the profits."

The Black Bat shook his head slowly. "Wrong that time, Silk. They are mixed up somehow, but they didn't hire Antal or direct these murders. I know who did that."

"You—know?" Silk gulped. "But who? How do you know? How did you find out?"

"There is no time for explanations now. Silk, here is your detail: you are in the same disguise as when you met Mrs. Bannister. She is certain to have told Recor, her grandson, what you looked like when you first met her. He'll readily believe you are just one of the mob if you hand out a line with your customary skill.

"Go to the Bannister home. See Recor and tell him he's got to start getting things ready for the big pay-off. Tell him his grandmother is dead and they'll find the body when Antal gets good and

ready to have them discover it. Rub it in—be as tough as you can. Say that unless he delivers on the line and within twenty-four hours he'll take the rap. And remind him he is just as guilty of his grandmother's murder as any other member of the gang."

"But he couldn't lay his hands on that estate so quick," Silk protested. "She can't be declared legally dead until they find the body, or a number of years pass by."

QUINN shook his head.

"Recor won't think of that. Not if I have him properly catalogued. He'll go into a rage. Better have a gun ready, but don't hurt him. I want that boy aroused until he's prepared for anything. It's important."

"Yes, sir," Silk answered. "Shall I walk, or will I drop you off somewhere and go on with the car?"

"Drop me off near Galvin's home," the Black Bat ordered. "That's where the showdown will take place."

Silk started the car.

"I'm beginning to get it, sir. Galvin has had two hundred and fifty thousand dollars paid him on his son's insurance policy. Antal and his boss want it. They'll grab some other member of the family and force him to pay. But how are you so sure it will happen tonight?"

"Because," the Black Bat said, with a slow smile, "I've planned it that way."

Silk dropped him close to Galvin's home. Then he sped away to fulfill his part of the game.

The Black Bat, hood in place, guns ready, made his way across yards until he was at the rear of Galvin's home. He prowled around until he was certain no one else had the house under observation. Then he vanished in the darkness to await developments.

They came within thirty minutes. The Black Bat's supersensitive eyes caught a glimpse of a shadowy form slinking toward the rear door. As the intruder approached, the Black Bat recognized Antal. The gaunt killer had a heavy revolver in his fist and the look on his face spelled murder. Antal was coming to collect his cut, or else.

Antal moved along beneath a window, raised his head a few inches and peered inside. The Black Bat heard the hammer of the killer's revolver draw back with a click. Then Antal drew the brim of his hat way down, squared his bony shoulders and advanced toward the back door.

The Black Bat crept forward, slipping one of his automatics out of its holster. If Antal meant business, so did the Black Bat. At this stage of the game mistakes would be forever unalterable.

Then a car door banged on the street. Antal ducked hastily, ran several yards from the house and made his way forward to see if the callers were headed for Galvin's home. The Black Bat went, too, but only to a point where his eyes could penetrate the darkness and make out the features of the three men who walked up the path to the front door.

Ronald Tunick, president of the Security Insurance Company, was in the lead. His shoulders drooped, his face bore the resigned look of a defeated man. Behind him, aggressive and cocksure, were Dr. Lawrence Luddy and Paradon, the shyster attorney.

Paradon rang the bell with his cane. The door opened and Galvin appeared. Apparently he had been preparing to go out or had just come in, for he wore hat and coat.

"Come in, gentlemen," he said politely. "We'll have a drink and then discuss our business. My family is out of town. We'll be quite alone. I sent for you so we might have a final showdown on this ghastly business."

Suddenly Antal burst from his hiding place behind the hedge. His gun covered the quartette and his voice was a snarl of hatred.

"Yeah," he ground out bitterly, "let's go in and talk it over! I'm cutting myself in on this deal, too. I'm a smart guy, understand? I know what's going on and if one of you squawks, I'll drill him. Move!"

THEY went into the house too fast for the Black Bat to swing into action. The door slammed and he heard a burglar chain slip into place. He had a glimpse of the men as they passed by a window with a drawn shade. Antal still held all the cards and he was playing his hand cunningly.

The Black Bat ran lightly to the rear of the house and approached the back door. It was locked and he reasoned that if the front door was supplied with a burglar chain, the back door would be similarly equipped. And the Black Bat had no tools to overcome that difficulty.

He tested windows, found them all locked. He could not simply break into one of them for Antal, forewarned, would open fire without even caring who might be on the way to interrupt the party.

There was one other method, barring the risky idea of climbing a tree and trying to jump through midair and grasp one of the second-story windows. For there were no convenient porch roofs to this house.

The Black Bat ran swiftly to the cellar hatchway, raised the cover and dropped it in place after him, The intense gloom that shrouded the tiny cellarway only served to make things clearer for the Black Bat. He saw the cheap lock on the cellar door. From his kit of miniature tools he took a tiny pair of pliers, inserted them into the keyhole and grasped the key on the other side of the door. By applying

pressure and firmly turning the key the bolt slid back. He swung the door wide, stepped into the cellar proper and heard angry, muffled voices above him.

The stairway to the first floor loomed up and he climbed it, blessing the silence that his crepe soled shoes lent him. Noiselessly opening the door at the top of the steps, he slipped into the hallway and edged his way along the wall until he reached the heavy portieres decorating the door to the room where the men were assembled.

He drew one curtain away until he could peer into the room. Paradon and Tunick sat on a leather davenport, their hands resting on their thighs. Dr. Luddy occupied an overstuffed chair that all but swallowed him. Galvin, white and so obviously shaken that he had forgotten to remove his hat or coat, was seated behind a desk, his back toward the Black Bat. Antal menaced all of them, but most of his attention was on Galvin.

"This time," Antal was thundering, "I'm going outta here with plenty of dough. Galvin, you got paid off. Two hundred and fifty grand. We damned near got it, and if the Black Bat hadn't stuck his nose into my affairs, you'da paid it over without a squawk. Well, pay it over now!"

"But I haven't got a quarter of a million dollars in cash," Galvin quavered. "I–I can't possibly pay you."

"No?" Antal shouted. "Well I got some private dope, understand? I know you got that dough here—in cold cash, too. You wanta get a slug in your kneecap—just for a starter? Come on! Get that money out and hand it over." Galvin's hands shook violently. He lowered them a trifle and Antal snarled a warning. Galvin made a despairing gesture.

"But—but the money—it's in my desk. How can I get it if you won't let me?"

"Okay," Antal snapped. "Get it, and remember I'm watching you every second, One phony play and I'll drill you through the head. Get busy!"

TOSSING aside his hat and coat, Galvin crossed the room and slowly pulled out the desk drawer. From his position near the door, the Black Bat

Galvin lowered his hands a trifle and Antal snarled a warning.

caught the gleam of a gun just under Galvin's outstretched hand. Galvin was going to shoot it out. The Black Bat's own weapon came up and he drew a precise bead on Antal's head.

Suddenly Galvin thrust his hand into the drawer. It moved as fast as the tongue of a serpent. There was an explosion. Antal's weapon went off, but as he fired Galvin had slipped out of the chair and sought protection behind the desk.

Antal, his tall, gaunt frame erect as a ramrod, pivoted very deliberately, like a soldier going through his drill in slow motion, Then he uttered a long, drawn-out sigh and toppled over like a tall chimney with its base blasted out with dynamite.

Galvin arose, gun still smoking in his fist. He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief and sank back into his chair. Dr. Luddy hurried over to where Antal had fallen. When he straightened up, his face was grave.

"Dead. You got him right between the eyes, Galvin. That was a good piece of work. Anybody know who this gunman was?"

Galvin nodded. "Yes—yes. I know him. My daughter Elaine described him and he matches the description perfectly. He is the man who kidnapped her, held her while I was being bled out of the money Tunick paid me for my son's insurance coverage. I—I don't feel very well, gentlemen. This has been an exhausting experience. I—I'm glad he's dead. He mistreated Elaine—starved her. I'm sure he meant to murder her after I paid him the money."

"And you know what I think?" Paradon broke in. "He also killed your son. He had him insured first, then he murdered him so you'd collect the insurance and he could get it from you with more murder."

Dr. Luddy swung on Tunick.

"Now I'll tell you what I think. You're behind it all, Tunick. You, the president of the Security Insurance Company, hired this killer. Retained him to commit murder so your company would pay off. Your pet agent, Morgan, wrote the policies—faked them, too, I'm wagering. He used doubles for the medical examinations. Then, after a short time, your hired assassins did their bit. You knew to whom and when those policies would be paid. You knew when to strike."

Tunick heaved a vast sigh and leaned back against the cushions of the davenport.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Tonight I'm a ruined man. The insurance company I helped to build is no longer mine. I signed my resignation as president and withdrew from the board of directors. However, I'll be damned if I'll admit engineering these murders. You have to call in the police to account for the death of this crook. Call them in—make your accusations before them. If they believe you, I'll surrender. I can't fight or argue tonight. I tell you I'm on the verge of a breakdown!"

Paradon picked up the telephone. He eyed Galvin.

"Keep Tunick covered," he said, "I'll get the police here and let them learn what we've discovered. That's why we brought you here, Tunick—to show you up, make you confess. If there was any way we could have kept the facts from the public, we would have done so. This will completely ruin the Security Insurance Company. We'll have canceled contracts, lapsed policies and no new business at all. Tonight I became a director of the firm. I wanted to maintain the reputation of the company—but I see now how wrong I've been. You can't circumvent murder."

He dialed the police and gave them a terse message. Then he hung up with a bang. Galvin, the gun shaking slightly, kept it trained on Tunick.

Suddenly every light in the house winked out.

CHAPTER XX
All the Cards—Face Down

BREAKING into the sudden silence, there was a sound of a scuffle in the middle of the room. Then the shadowy form of a man began running madly. Running as if death was at his heels.

There was an explosion. The shadowy figure uttered a shrill screech of pain, but went on. He reached the front door, tried to open it, but the burglar chain blocked him. He whirled and, despite his wounds, ran up the staircase to the second floor.

"Galvin!" Dr. Luddy's voice was hoarse with excitement. "Shoot him! Get him!"

The indistinct form reached the top of the steps and for a second was silhouetted against the two windows at the landing. A gun blasted. The shadowy form stopped dead, sagged against the window, then slowly sank to the floor.

A siren howled outside. Heavy footsteps announced the arrival of the police.

Sergeant McGrath was the first through the door. At his heels came Commissioner Warner. Someone went down to the cellar and replaced a blown out fuse. The lights came on. Galvin, still clutching the gun, surrendered it eagerly to McGrath's outstretched hand.

Paradon ran up the stairs and looked at the man lying there; looked, without touching him. He saw blood on the man's face and that was enough. He descended the steps slowly.

"He's dead all right. No question about it. You got him through the head, Galvin—just as you got that other one."

"Other one?" McGrath yelled. "What's going on here? Mass murder?"

Galvin sighed. "Not murder, officer, I shot in self-defense and there are two witnesses—Attorney Paradon and Dr. Luddy. The man in the other room is named Antal. He kidnapped my daughter and came back here tonight trying to get money out of me at the point of a gun."

"If it's Antal," McGrath said, "nobody will blame you much, Galvin. Who is the guy at the top of the steps?"

"Tunick—Ronald Tunick, president of the Security Insurance Company. Paradon, Dr. Luddy and I had evidence enough to send him to the chair. Somehow the lights went out and he broke for it. I—I shot him down. After all, he was responsible for the death of my son."

Commissioner Warner took charge. He herded everyone into the spacious living room and took the center of the floor himself.

"Now I'd like an explanation," he said. "You three men indicate that Tunick was the leader of the murder-for-insurance ring. Can you prove it?" Paradon jumped to his feet.

"We have absolute evidence, Cornmissioner! We suspected this for a long time. I rented an office above Tunick's. Tunick claimed to be a collector of old phonograph records. He received many of them through the mail. We suspected that some of those were more than they seemed. Last night I took my life in my hands and Dr. Luddy lowered me two floors from my own office, so I might invade Tunick's. I selected that method so there would be no clues to show I had been there. If I was wrong, I wanted to be sure before I called in the police.

"Well, I found a record on Tunick's desk. It was neatly packaged, but I knew what to look for. That record is now in my office safe. It was from this man, Antal, who lies dead at your feet. It gave Tunick instructions that he was to prepare the loot for a cut. Isn't that evidence enough? With Tunick's final move in trying to escape? That was the act of a guilty man."

COMMISSIONER WARNER signaled McGrath. The detective sergeant gave soft orders to the men in the hallway. Two of them entered the room and took up positions near the front window.

"If Tunick was the guilty man, as you indicate," Warner said softly, "how is it that a young man named Newman Recor came to my office a few moments ago and told me a weird story about the murder of his grandmother? She was Mrs. Bannister, if that enlightens you. Recor states that he was forced to help in this murder, and that he doesn't believe Tunick was behind the killers. He told me that he—"

Warner ceased speaking abruptly. His eyes were wide, his mouth slightly open. Against the further

wall was the huge image of a bat. It seemed to have poised in flight and become an unflickering design on the wall. Warner turned around slowly. The others, aware of a new presence, turned, too.

The Black Bat stood just inside a window. Two guns were in his hands and the eyes behind the mask glittered brilliantly.

"If each of you will remain exactly as he is now, no one will be hurt. Sergeant McGrath, you might pass the word to your men in the hallway that if they try to open fire, I shall be forced to shoot, much as I dislike doing so."

Galvin stepped forward.

"This man is the Black Bat," he said. "He may be wanted by the police, but I classify him as a friend. He saved my daughter's life."

Commissioner Warner stepped forward a pace.

"It's all right, Bat. You have my word that there will be no shooting. My men will govern themselves according to those orders."

The Black Bat relaxed a trifle.

"Thank you, Commissioner. First of all, I might state that Ronald Tunick is not dead. Galvin's bullet hit the wall, not him. I pulled Tunick down and slugged him. If he looks dead, it's because of a superficial wound he received as he fled to the front door."

McGrath started for the hallway.

"I'd better put cuffs on him," he said.

"Wait!" the Black Bat called out. "Keep your handcuffs for someone else. Tunick is not the killer. I've been here for some time. I saw Galvin kill

Antal and it was in self-defense. However, I also saw Galvin kick a wire over there near his desk. That shorted the lights. Then he stepped up to Tunick and whispered to him to run for it, that he was giving him a break." He turned his head slightly. "Why then, Galvin, did you try to kill him?"

Galvin grew ruddy. "I did no such thing! Tunick simply ran for it when the lights went out. How can you stand there and testify to such events that transpired in darkness?"

"Because I can see in the dark," the Black Bat said. "I can also hear exceptionally well. The game is up, Galvin. You're guilty of murder—mass murder. Commissioner, if you'll bring in young Recor, he may have an interesting story to tell."

McGrath moved toward Galvin, ready to pounce on him if he tried a getaway. McGrath could not figure out how in the world Galvin was the killer, but the Black Bat had not gone wrong yet. McGrath was taking no chances.

YOUNG Recor came in slowly. He saw the Black Bat and shivered. Then, so fast that his words tumbled over one another, he blurted the truth.

"I was framed into this! A man I met in a nightclub got me into a card game and the others were in league with him. They cheated—took every cent I had. Then one of the players made an accusation. I had a gun. I took it out. Someone grabbed me, but the gun went off. The card sharp was on the floor—dead. They told me I'd go to the chair for it unless I obeyed their orders. I tell you I couldn't help myself! They threatened to tell the police about the killing. I don't believe now that man was dead at all. I believe it was all a frame-up! I saw Galvin at the nightclub when it happened. I think he engineered the whole thing." Galvin clasped both hands in front of him and assumed the expression of an undertaker.

"This young man is somewhat mad," he said. "Did it ever occur to you gentlemen that my son, my own flesh and blood, was murdered by this ring?

"Have you thought of my daughter being kidnapped and held under cruel conditions so I would pay over the money my son's insurance policy provided? This is sheer drivel and I warn you it won't end here."

"You're right there, Galvin," the Black Bat said in a voice tinged with sarcasm. "It will only end when they march you from a death cell. You are not Ralph Galvin's father, nor Elaine's. Their father died years ago. So many years ago and so far from here that the fact was never known in these parts. You married his widow and her children took your name. There is a group photograph in Mrs. Galvin's room that shows her, the children and her first husband. I've checked further, through some old diaries I found in a chest. They'll convict you, Galvin, if your only defense is your relationship with Ralph and Elaine."

Galvin's eyes grew wide and terror-ridden. He walked slowly over to her desk and sat down, picked up a round paperweight and began to toy with it. McGrath watched him narrowly.

"You hired Antal through some intermediary, now dead probably," the Black Bat went on. "Antal didn't know who you were. You insured Ralph, then killed him. You had Elaine kidnapped and had Collins put in your home as a guard to watch you. That was to throw all suspicion away from you for both the benefit of the police and the gunmen who worked for you. But you sent Antal a phonograph record ordering him to murder Collins because he snooped and knew too much. That was a bad mistake. Collins could only snoop in your house, Galvin. He found out you were the mystery men and held it over your head. There could have been no other reason for eliminating him.

"You wanted to frame Tunick and you had Antal send those records to him. Morgan, picking up Tunick's mail, was unknowingly subjected to theft. The record containing the message was lifted and another one, really an old record of the type that Tunick collected, was substituted. Morgan carried the messages without knowing it." Galvin said nothing but there was a look akin to madness in his eyes. Commissioner Warner seemed stunned.

"BUT why?" he asked. "Why should Galvin do all this?"

"At first Galvin only wanted to profit by murdering for insurance," the Black Bat answered quickly. "Then he rigged up a scheme to take over the whole insurance company. You see, he couldn't buy the necessary control with the money he had made from his other insurance murder frauds, because that might have cast suspicion on him. He wasn't supposed to have so much money. But with the insurance from his stepson's policy he could do so. Not in straightforward fashion, of course. That would be too obvious. Therefore, he had the cover-up of his stepdaughter's kidnapping and the pretended extortion demands. He never intended to pay that ransom money. He'd have conveniently arranged for the girl's escape, I'm sure, if I hadn't rescued her. But it would look good, and he'd have been able openly to keep the money from the policy without any suspicion. As he did.

"Tunick paid him a quarter of a million dollars in full on the claim of his son's death. Galvin paid that money back to Tunick, who was on the verge of bankruptcy, for certain investments that gave Galvin firm hold on the Security Insurance Company. Not, as I first thought when I saw the

check, for extortion demands. I wondered about that later, because I realized that Galvin hadn't been forced to pay the ransom, after all. Then if the check were for something else, he must have made previous negotiations with all intentions of paying—before he even had the money!

"To get the controlling interest, Galvin had Mrs. Bannister kidnapped and apparently murdered. Recor would inherit and among the assets of the estate were more bonds which would give Galvin complete control of the insurance company. Dr. Luddy was a director in the firm and he also believed that Tunick was guilty—inspired by Galvin's secret accusations. Paradon was in on it. He wanted a cut. Young Recor, in desperation, went to him for advice and, keen-minded as he is, Paradon saw just what this was all about."

"I committed no crime," Paradon yelped. "There is nothing on me. I'll talk, from what Recor told me and my own knowledge that Galvin was trying to corner a controlling interest in Security Insurance, I suspected it was Galvin. Then when Galvin actually bought Tunick's bonds, I knew. So did Dr. Luddy. There wasn't much we could do, without any tangible proof, so we decided to cut ourselves in, that's all. Galvin was a man of modest means. He needed money so he insured and murdered his stepson."

"That's enough," the Black Bat snapped. "It ought to provide disbarment proceedings against you, Paradon. And you, Dr. Luddy—did it ever occur to you that Galvin was framing you into a neat little trap by infecting those instruments and faking that accident with Singleton? You operated on Singleton. He is dead. Galvin could hold that over your head, tie you up with the murder ring if necessary and in that manner keep you down. You'd have felt his wrath before long."

"It—It's unbelievable!" Commissioner Warner mopped his face. "Of course things tie up and we'll develop evidence enough to convict, but Galvin—"

THE Black Bat spoke again. "Galvin is a peculiar person. He has a dual personality. One part of him exists for pleasure. Sergeant McGrath tipped me off about that angle not many hours ago and it sent me thinking. I had Galvin checked and found that he has two existences—one connected with gambling, women and wine; the other, a home-loving family man. When Jim Fisher returned and suspected something wrong about Ralph Galvin's sudden death, Galvin found it out and murdered those three men in the cemetery. He substituted another body for his stepson's and disposed of the real corpse in some other grave, I presume."

Galvin arose unsteadily.

"I want to confess," he said. "I–I—"

Then he raised both hands. He still held the paperweight with which he had been toying. The Black Bat saw that Galvin's right forefinger was thrust through a ring fastened to the weight.

Galvin's voice arose to a shriek. "All right—I killed them! I fooled all of you stupid morons. I'd have taken over the insurance company in a few months and then I'd have operated on the level. What if I did want money? Lots of it?"

McGrath advanced grimly. Galvin backed away a step.

"Don't come any closer," he shrilled, "This is a grenade I'm holding. I've kept it for just this purpose. You can't shoot me fast enough so I won't be able to pull this ring. We'll all go to hell together—the Black Bat along with us! I'm willing to die if he goes out, too."

Suddenly young Recor went into a tackling dive. At the same moment the Black Bat's gun spat. Galvin's left hand, clutching the bomb, fell to his side with blood dripping from it. The bomb started to slip away from the pin. Recor made a grab for it with both hands. He twisted Galvin's wrist until it went numb and with the other hand he kept that bomb from being separated from the pin.

McGrath swung a blackjack. Galvin slumped to the floor and Recor cautiously removed the deadly bomb.

"That was a brave bit of work, Recor," the Black Bat said without a tremor in his voice. "You've rather redeemed yourself. As a partial reward I'll tell you that your grandmother is alive, well, and by this time safely in her own home. Go to her, tell her what a fool you've been and make amends. Govern yourself like a man and if there is any punishment coming for your part in this, take it with your chin out."

Recor's eyes were shining happily. He could not talk. He could just nod his head violently.

The Black Bat faced McGrath.

"At your feet, Sergeant," he said, "is the wire that Galvin shorted. Pick it up and see what I mean."

McGrath stooped and seized the wire. Instantly the lights went out. When McGrath got them back on, there was no sign of the Black Bat.

CHAPTER XXI
McGrath Names Himself

PLACID and patient, Tony Quinn, in his smoking jacket and tweed trousers, sat before his fireplace. His eyes were filmed over like those of a blind man. Silk sat beside him, apparently reading a newspaper.

"But Antal," Silk asked, "how come he went there? You said he didn't know that Galvin was the big boy behind the murders."

Tony Quinn chuckled softly.

"Galvin used to contact Antal by a recording. He'd advertise in the newspaper giving an address to which the recording had been sent. It was always one of these professional mailing addresses. Antal simply went there and got the recording. I had you insert an ad in tonight's paper. It indicated that Antal might find a new record at a certain address. He did—one that I prepared myself in the laboratory.

"I faked Galvin's voice well enough and gave Antal the news that Galvin had cashed the insurance check and had the cash at his home, Antal was to get it, keep it all for his share in the proceedings. I indicated that things were so hot the whole affair had to be dropped temporarily. That brought Antal to Galvin's in a big hurry. I hoped to overhear Galvin admit to Antal that he was the mystery man, but Tunick and the others showed up too soon.

"Therefore Galvin, figuring that Antal knew who he was and was trying to hijack him, used a gun. Antal got what was coming to him. That day Collins had you snatched—remember how Galvin slugged you with a chair? I couldn't imagine anyone in Galvin's position doing that. It made me suspicious. The rest of it I've told you."

Silk nodded and grinned. He started to say something when the phone rang. He answered it, spoke briefly and returned to Quinn's side with a puzzled expression on his face.

"That was McGrath," he said. "He wanted to know if you were in. Said he was on his way here."

Tony Quinn's face grew stark with horror.

"Silk, I slipped! It just occurred to me. McGrath has a sample of my handwriting, stolen from this room. I sent him a message—an urgent one to help me save Mrs. Bannister. I was in a hurry and I didn't think. He also has a sample of the Black Bat's handwriting. If he has compared them—"

Silk broke out in a cold sweat. Someone tapped on the secret door. It was Butch. Silk told him what had happened and Quinn ordered Butch away in a hurry.

"McGrath will have nothing on you, Butch," Silk hastily assured. "Tell Carol to lay low, too."

Butch vanished and two minutes later McGrath arrived. He walked into the living room and sat down beside Quinn. He put a cigar between his teeth, bit off the end and threw it into the fireplace. Then he fumbled around in his pockets for a match.

Quinn stared straight ahead. Silk, in the hallway, prayed silently. It looked like the end of the Black Bat.

Then McGrath talked.

"Well, Quinn," he said, "the Black Bat cleaned up another mess. You know, I swore I'd get him someday and I shall. When that day rolls around, you will walk into a nice neat little cell. However, I suppose you'll deny being the Black Bat and I couldn't prove you were. At that, I may even be all wrong and you really are blind. Sometimes I'm not sure; sometimes I am. This happens to be one of the times when I can't figure out how you could possibly do it."

TONY QUINN'S face betrayed none of the turmoil seething within him. At any moment McGrath would produce handcuffs, slap them in place and—exit the Black Bat.

McGrath fumbled again for a match and could not find one. He slipped a hand into an inner pocket and took out two pieces of paper. He spread these out on his knee.

"Wonder what I'm carrying this junk around for?" he said in a steady voice. "A bad habit of mine, carrying notes in my pockets until they rot."

He rolled both papers into a long tapir, stepped over to the fireplace and set fire to it. He lit his cigar and threw the still burning papers into the smoldering logs.

"Well," he said, "guess I'll be on my way. Funny thing about me. I like to pay my debts."

Tony Quinn spoke to him for the first time.

"I have no doubt of that, Sergeant. You're an honest man. Someday, I hope, you'll catch this Black Bat redhanded."

McGrath smiled. "Sure I will. He can't get away with it forever."

McGrath nodded to Silk and walked through the door. On his way to the car he was muttering to himself.

"I'm a damned fool. A stupid damned fool. I should have compared the handwriting and made sure, even if I didn't use the information. But handwriting experts don't always agree. Maybe it wouldn't have done any good anyhow. Still—boy, I've gone soft. Soft and foolish."

He got behind the wheel of the car. His jaw dropped an inch, his cigar tumbled into his lap. Across the whole Center of his windshield were Black Bat stickers.

Behind a hedge, Butch was barely able to restrain the horse laugh that surged up within him.

McGrath ground out a salty oath. He stepped on the starter and pulled away.

"Oh-h-h, what a fool I am!" he groaned. "If this ever gets out. Fool, that's me! Jackass, nincompoop-double damned fool!"

Then he frowned. "I wonder! I wonder if he is the Black Bat! Those stickers—he couldn't have put them on the windshield. And his eyes didn't show any recognition of those papers. I wonder if I could have caught him at that!"

THE END

THE BELFRY by Will Murray

For our second Sanctum Books Black Bat volume, we present the next two novels in the series. We can't promise that we will always release these exciting tales in their original sequence, but it's usually most interesting to watch an author build and develop his protagonist over his earliest exploits.

Previously, we told the tale of how the first appearance of the Black Bat was published only a month after the debut of Batman in *Detective Comics* #27 during the Spring of 1939. Although the Black Bat was created approximately a month before Bill Finger and Bob Kane conceived Batman around Christmas, 1938, the Dark Knight reached print first, debuting in *Detective Comics* #27, May, 1939, which went on sale March 30th. A scant month later, the July *Black Book Detective* reached newsstands, with a street date of April 28th.

Pulp magazines and comic books tended to operate on different sides of the street, but here the startling similarities between these two characters created a legal conflict.

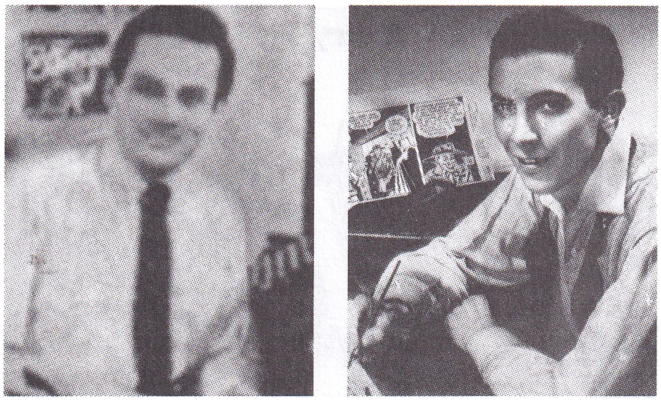
Fortunately for all concerned, it was settled amicably, but for an unknown period of time in 1939, one of these characters was at risk to be consigned to oblivion.

Truthfully, neither character was entirely original.

All through the 1930s, Bat-form villains filled the hero pulps. The Spider battled the Bat Man, while Secret Agent X tackled Emperor Zero and his flying batmen. The Secret Six encountered the bat-man. It was a recurring trope. In 1933, the obscure Berryman Press issued the short-lived *Black Bat Detective Mysteries*, starring a rather ordinary detective who went by that name.

Both Batman and the Black Bat might be said to trace back to Mary Roberts' Rinehart's famous novel turned play turned 1930 film, *The Bat Whispers*. Bob Kane cited it as an early influence on Batman, saying, "The story was about a lot of murders in an old mansion. I remember shadowy-like figures on the wall when he was about to kill someone. They caught up with him in the attic—he wore a costume that looked a little like my early Batman's, with gloves, a mask, and scalloped wings. He looked like a bat—very ominous."

Thrilling Publications' editor-in-chief Leo Margulies had previously published a heroic character called the Bat back in 1934 and 1935 in *Popular Detective*, a magazine initially edited by Jack Schiff, later to become one of Batman's most significant editors. Under the byline "C.K.M. Scanlon," an unknown writer believed to be Zorro's Johnston McCulley produced four Bat stories for Schiff. Strangely, a fifth entry, "Blind as a Bat," was announced, but never appeared in the issue



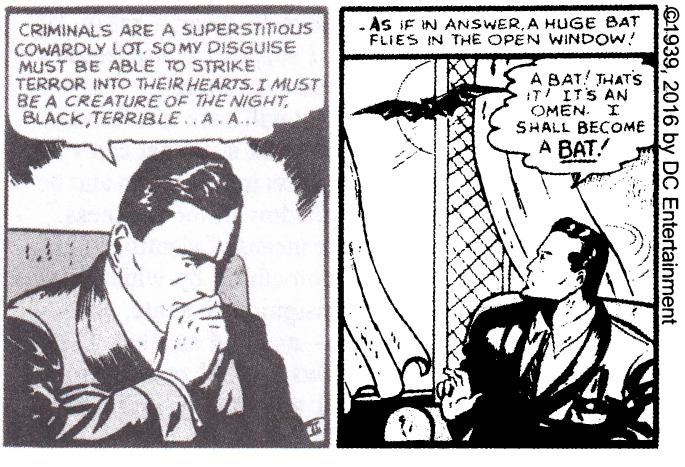
Batman's Bill Finger and Bob Kane

of *Popular Detective* for which it was intended.

The protagonist was a disgraced private detective Dawson Clade who, in the time-honored heroic manner, had been framed for crimes he did not commit, but who managed to escape wrongful justice in the electric chair by hiding out in a cabin in the woods.

There ensued a memorable scene that writer Bill Finger apparently later lifted when he first told the origin of Batman in *Detective Comics* #33.

> Yet he was one man working alone against the crooks and the corrupt politicians who went hand in glove with the evil forces of the underworld. For that reason he must become a figure of sinister import to all of these people. A strange Nemesis that would eventually become a legendary terror to all of crimedom....
>
> He was still thinking. Just what the character would be that he intended to assume was still vague in his mind. He only knew that it would have to be some nubilous [sic] creature of the night that lurked in the shadows.
>
> He glanced at the oil lamp burning on a table. Then he swung around, suddenly tense. In the shadows above his head there came a slithering, flapping sort of sound.
>
> Clade leaped back instinctively as something brushed past his cheek. Again the flapping wings—a weird rustling sound. Terror overcame him for an instant as something brushed against his hair, caught in a tangled lock. Something that seemed unspeakably evil.



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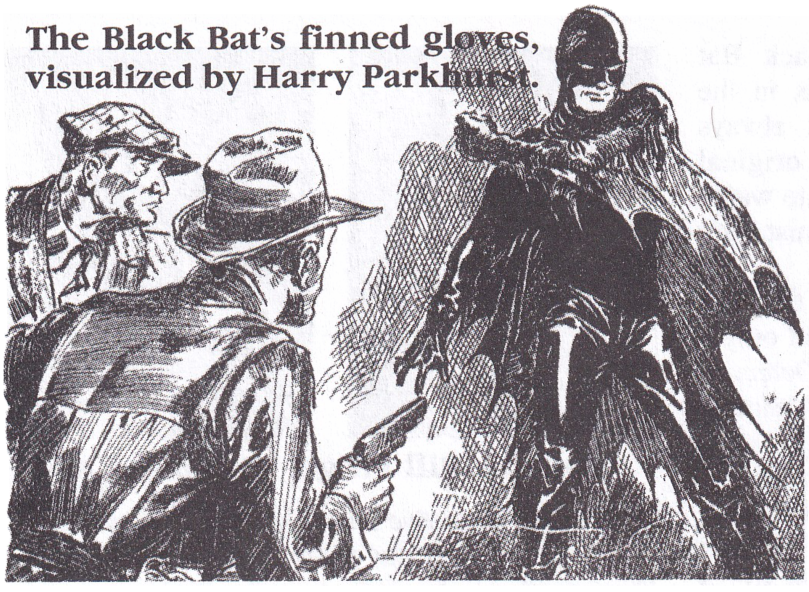


The Black Bat's finned gloves, visualized by Harry Parkhurst.

He reached up, tore at it with fingers that had suddenly grown frantic. He flung the thing aside. As he did so he saw that it was a bat. An insectivorous mammal, with its wings formed by a membrane stretched between the tiny elongated fingers, legs and tail.

As the creature hovered above the lamp for an instant it cast a huge shadow on the cabin wall. "That's it!" exclaimed Clade aloud. "I'll call myself 'The Bat.'"

Clade went on to become the Bat. For a disguise, he donned a black hood with a white bat emblem gleaming from the forehead.

When District Attorney Anthony Quinn lost his sight to an acid attack, only to have his vision restored by a secret eye transplant, he experienced a similar epiphany while discussing his disfigurement with his valet, Silk Kirby, in *Brand of the Black Bat*:

"But how are you going to handle it, sir?" Silk wanted to know. "Your face, if you'll pardon me, is disfigured. It won't be a pleasant sight when you first see it. You'll be recognized."

"My face?" Quinn leaned back and compressed his lips. "That could be taken care of. Plastic surgery can make it over. But not now, Silk. Not now! I want people to think I'm helpless and that I haven't enough interest in life to even have my features mended. We'll operate anonymously. No one must know who we are. I'll have to wear a mask, of course—a complete hood, I suppose, if my features are as bad as that doctor said they were."

"Yes, sir," Silk nodded, "it will have to be a hood. I'll make one, sir, of silk. Black silk, that can't be seen in the night. You can dress in black also and be nothing more than a dim shadow in the darkness."

"But there must be some means of identification." Quinn pursed his lips. "Something by which men can recognize me. An insignia—a name, Silk—I have it! I've been blind—as blind as a bat. I still am so far as anyone knows. I shall prowl during the night. Bats are blind and fly by night also. I'll be the bat, Silk. The Black Bat!"

Strangely, Quinn never contrived a bat emblem of his own. That was probably for the best, given the dust-up that resulted when Batman appeared on the American scene.

During these early issues, the Thrilling house art director, Alexander Samalman, was apparently trying to cut corners on his art budget, for sprinkled throughout the earliest issues are cuts taken from older Thrilling magazines. It's probably not a coincidence that with the fourth issue, two illustrations from the first appearance of the 1934 Bat are reproduced (and reprinted on pages 105 and 115 of this volume). We don't know when Thrilling and DC Comics finally settled their legal differences, but no doubt if it went to court, publisher Ned Pines was prepared to show that they had published a bat-hero that predated Batman by five years.

It should be noted that DC didn't get around to trademarking Batman until May 6, 1939, citing that date as the first use, when in fact this marked five days after his second appearance in *Detective Comics* #28.

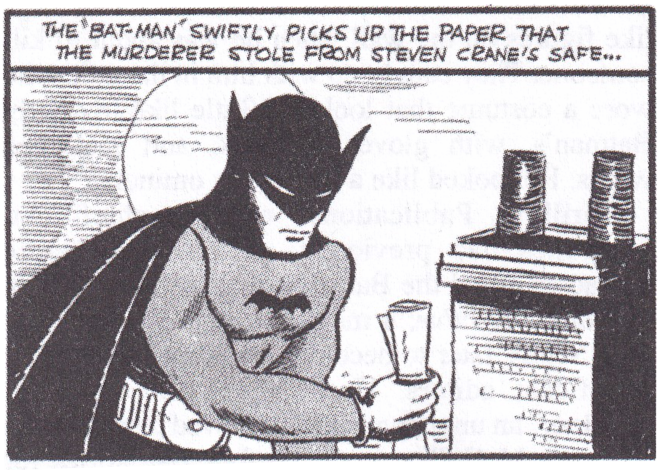
There was one amusing wrinkle to all this. When introduced, the Black Bat wore gauntlets decorated with fins, as interior artist Harry Parkhurst first drew him. Seeing this, Bob Kane purloined them for Batman, who tackled "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate" bare-handed in his first appearance.

"He didn't have any gloves on," Bill Finger admitted. "We gave him gloves because naturally he'd leave fingerprints. They weren't the gauntlet type; that came later on."

"We added them so he wouldn't leave fingerprints," agreed Kane.

"They stole our character, so we stole their gloves," Finger explained .

But it was the other way around, according to Norman Daniels. "We were the first."



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Batman sans gauntlet fins as visualized by Bob Kane in *Detective Comics* #27.

Batman's gloves evolved into gauntlets over his first year of publication, finally sprouting fins in *Detective Comics* #37, March, 1940. As far as anyone knows, the Thrilling staff never complained.

Both Bob Kane and Bill Finger were huge pulp magazine fans. Finger particularly read voraciously.

"Bill had it down pat," Kane admitted. "He was a pulp reader. As a matter of fact, I read all the pulps that Bill Finger read. He gave me his magazines and I'd read them. I was influenced by Doc Savage and the pulps, to some extent."

"I patterned my style of writing after The Shadow," Finger stated. "My first script was a take-off of a Shadow story.... I was very much influenced by The Shadow and Doc Savage, the Phantom, things of that sort. My idea was to have Batman be a combination of Douglas Fairbanks, Sherlock Holmes, The Shadow and Doc Savage as well."

Bat-editor Jack Schiff

But the 1934 Bat was such an obscure character that no one ever thought to ask Finger if he'd ever read the exploits of Dawson Clade. It was a question that in later years haunted Jack Schiff, who had worked with fellow Thrilling editor Mort Weisinger on the Black Bat, and who followed Weisinger to DC Comics, succeeding him as editor of *Batman* in 1942. "If Mort Weisinger were alive," Schiff mused, "I'd ask him how much influence the Bat had on Batman. Had Batman come from the Bat? I'm curious about it."

Norman Daniels held a more sanguine view, however. Interviewed before his passing in 1995, he remarked:

> I can't see very much of a connection between the two. I was paid for what I did and that's all there was to it. I had no rights to the thing, no copyright. Everything was up to the publisher. If they wanted to promote it, they could have. But they never did.

Our novels this time are *The Black Bat Strikes Again* and *The Black Bat's Challenge*, which appeared in the November 1939 and January 1940 issues of *Black Book Detective*. Norman Daniels penned the first story in May and the second in July. Daniels' original title for our lead novel was "Nemesis in Black."

For *The Black Bat Strikes Again*, Daniels dipped into his pre-pulp career, that of an insurance investigator. After breaking into the pulp field in 1931, he held onto his job as long as he could. One day his boss paid him a call at home, and the door was answered by the Daniels housemaid—whom he should not have been able to afford on his meager salary.

Daniels was asked to resign that very day and never worked at anything other than fiction for the rest of his natural life—some sixty productive years.

After last issue's spectacular Rudolph Belarski cover, Rafael DeSoto does the honors with a suitably creepy illustration for *The Black Bat Strikes Again*, which we've selected for our front cover. This is the first *Black Book Detective* cover to employ what had for years been the Thrilling template on *The Phantom Detective* magazine—a suspenseful scene over which loomed the hero's watchful head. Here, DeSoto adds bat wings to the ensemble, providing a credibly creepy touch.

At that time, DeSoto was painting the covers for the rival *Spider* magazine, and he did the honors for several consecutive *Black Bat* covers, beginning with the pair featured in this present volume. The artist's debuts on both series were virtually simultaneous. For a brief period in 1939-40, both pulps employed the convention of incorporating the hero's name into the story title. *The Spider* used it first, but within months both *The Phantom Detective* and *Black Bat Detective* shamelessly copied it. Eventually, *The Spider* would in turn borrow the "looming head" cover gimmick as well.

Now, turn the page for *Black Bat's Challenge*, in which Tony Quinn battles a criminal league of crippled beggars, a theme Daniels also explored in his 1935 *Phantom Detective* novel, *Master of the Damned*, and which he revisits along with the Black Bat and his coterie of crime crushers. •

Black Bat cover artist Rafael De Soto

Black Bat's

By G. WAYMAN JONES

Author of "Murder Calls the Black Bat," "The Black Bat Strikes Again," etc.

They saw the eerie appearance of the onrushing man. (Chapter XI)

Challenge

A Complete Book-Length Novel

Beggars Cannot Be Choosers, or the Leader of One of the Most Vicious Criminal Gangs of the Lame, Halt and Blind Ever Assembled Would Never Have Chosen to Buck That Tenacious Nemesis of Crime—Tony Quinn!

CHAPTER I
League of the Damned

A BLIND man with one arm stood against the brick wall of a deserted old factory building not far from the center of the great city. He held a harmonica between his lips and deftly moved it with his teeth and tongue to produce the melody of a popular song. His right hand—his only hand—held a tin cup in which he was jangling a five-cent piece noisily to attract the attention of the pedestrians who hurried by.

Another cripple, scooting along on a wheel platform made with roller skate wheels, passed by the blind man. Suddenly the tune of the harmonica changed to a weird, dismal air of which only a few bars were rendered. The cripple on the rolling platform inclined his head just the slightest and suddenly sent his small vehicle down an alley beside the factory building. He was rapidly swallowed up by the darkness. This same act happened again and again. Always some maimed person disreputably dressed maneuvered by, and always the blind man reverted to that melancholy song. It was a signal,

for each cripple scurried, limped, fumbled or rolled down that same alley.

A clock struck ten and the blind man with the harmonica muttered a curse at two young men who walked by without jangling a coin into his cup. A patrolman wheeled around the corner and the blind man vanished instantly.

In the darkness of the alley he ripped off his dark glasses, blinked a few times, then hurried on. His "blindness" was cured miraculously. He reached a small wooden door, weather-beaten with age, yet solid and studded with huge steel nails. He tapped on this smartly with his cane. It opened and a scowling hulk of a man let him in.

"Okay," the doorkeeper growled, "you did a swell job out there. Two hundred and thirty-one guys are here for the first meeting. Boy, I'm tellin' you this is gonna be some proposition! Yancey has got what it takes. Wait and see."

"Sure," the blind man agreed quickly. "We all know somethin' has gotta be done with them bluecoats drivin' us off the streets and stoppin' us from makin' a honest livin'. Me—I'm in favor of anythin'."

"Right you are, Squinty," the doorman said. "Now scram down them steps, turn right at the bottom and you'll find guys posted around who'll show you where to go."

"SQUINTY," the pseudo blind man, obeyed those orders eagerly. Whispered commands took him into a big cellar storeroom, musty now and damp. It had not been used for more than five years, but it served as an ideal meeting place.

The big room was full of men—men without arms, without legs, or eyes; men who talked with their fingers. Some slouched on the floor, withered useless legs sprawled out, crutches dropped beside them.

At the far end of the room was a crude desk fashioned of a big packing case. Another box served as a chair. And over it all hung the dankness of a grave.

Lights were suddenly dimmed and then a battery of strong lights turned into the faces of the cripples. It temporarily blinded those who could see. Then a weird figure came from a narrow door behind the makeshift desk. His audience could see little of him, for the lights were very strong, but the newcomer could survey those who waited to hear him speak, for he was behind that battery of lights.

He would have been a tall man if he had straightened himself up, but he was slouched over and then, as he turned, his profile showed that his left shoulder was deformed and hunched. He had a sallow, dead complexion, a predatory nose and a receding chin. His eyes were small and bright, set too far apart in his bulging skull. His hair was long and the color of straw. Those who could penetrate beyond the light gasped, for this man was eerie, almost terrifying to look upon.

Four husky men lined up behind him. They were harsh-faced brutes capable of any crime on the calendar. The yellow-haired man spoke and surprisingly enough his voice matched his appearance. It was shrill, high pitched and almost whining.

"I am Yancey," he said and peered around the room. "I have appointed myself as your leader and you need one. You need a man with my brains and my courage. The damned police are forcing you off the streets—forcing you to take to petty wages of relief. You, who have made a hundred or more dollars a week are now condemned to exist on fifteen dollars a week. Will you stand for that or will you listen to me?"

"We listen," a chorus of voices went up and from one corner the small group of mutes began flashing their fingers in a coded assent.

"Good," Yancey said. "I know you are all to be trusted for I have investigated each one of you. Here is the situation at the momen: you are being forced out of business, rendered nothing more than paupers. And nowhere is the solution. We band together in one unit capable of fighting those who would make fools of us. Together we can defy the police.

"Oh, don't get me wrong—I don't mean openly. That would be too hazardous. We'll make a living all right, and a better one than any of us have ever known before. We'll organize the greatest ring of criminals this country has ever known. We'll deal with everything from simple pocket-picking straight up to the robbery of banks.

"But there must be more of you. My men are now searching the city, locating every cripple, blind man and grifter. Before a week is up, we'll have two or three thousand men in our organization. Some of them we won't be able to trust at first. It will be up to you, who form my inner council, to see that these others obey me. Is that clear?"

"Wait a minute!" A stooped, dirty looking figure moved forward until he stood within ten feet of the packing box desk. "Me, I ain't so sure. What do we get out of it and what's your cut? How do we know that if the police land us, you won't take a run-out powder and leave us to be dumped in jail? Me, I been doin' okay and I can keep right on doin' it, police or no police. My take is about sixty-five bucks a week and that ain't chicken feed."

A FEW of the beggars chorused agreement and the same doubt. Yancey scowled and those tiny, piggish eyes of his gleamed in wrath. He motioned the speaker closer to the desk and also gave a covert signal to the four men who formed his

bodyguard. They closed in around the defiant speaker.

"Now," Yancey said glibly, "your name is Shannon, isn't it? You've been a grifter in this city for about ten weeks. You came here from St. Louis because the police kicked you out of there. Am I right?"

"Yeah, you're right," Shannon mumbled. "Now don't get me wrong. I ain't arguin' with the boys. All I want is to be shown. I'm listenin' and willin'."

Yancey stepped a little closer to Shannon, who had automatically drawn away from the menacing quartette of killers who were surrounding him. One of them shoved him roughly back into the middle of the floor.

"Sure you're willing," Yancey said in a mild, low voice. "In fact, you're more than willing. You want me to open up and tell you exactly what my intentions are. Then you can run back to Police Headquarters and sing—like a dozen canary birds. You're a rotten stool pigeon, a lousy spy. Don't argue—I'll prove it. Search him, boys."

Shannon was roughly seized and his pockets investigated. One of the burly thugs threw a leather case on the desk. Yancey picked it up, opened it and held a gold badge high so that everyone could see it.

"His name is Shannon all right," Yancey snarled. "But he didn't come here from St. Louis. He came from the Mendicancy Squad of the Police Department. He's been sent to spy on all of you, to gather evidence that can put many of you behind bars for years. He knows a good part of your number are fakes, frauds, and he intends to stop you. What will we do with him?"

"Burn him down!"

"Put a shiv through his throat!"

"Bust his head!"

"Dump him in the river!"

The suggestions came fast and furiously. Yancey smiled contentedly while Detective Sergeant Shannon, who had worked undercover for months, felt that his life was ebbing away just as surely as though twenty slugs had been already burned through his heart.

Yancey stepped close to Shannon and drew a clasp knife from his pocket. He pressed a spring and the big, wide blade flew open.

"I think," Yancey said judiciously, "that it will be the knife. A gun makes too much noise and it's over too fast. Strangling requires far too much energy, drowning isn't the best way so—it will be the knife."

Shannon shrank back, but two men who gripped him pushed him forward again. One of the thugs grasped his hair and pulled his head back to expose his throat to the bite of the blade. Yancey licked his

THE BLACK BAT

lips, drew a finger across the keen edge of the blade and then impulsively handed it to a man with only one arm who had come in close to better witness the murder.

"You may do the honors," Yancey said. "You are one of the number upon whom this man spied. Everyone in this room is with you so there's nothing to be afraid of."

"GIMME that shiv!"

The cripple extended his one arm. He took the knife, bared his teeth in a grimace of hatred and stepped close to Shannon. The knife sliced across the detective's throat twice. Nothing more was necessary. Shannon died within two minutes.

Yancey smiled again, patted the one-armed man on the shoulder and nodded in high satisfaction.

"Very well done, and the one man who could have betrayed us is dead. I'll dispose of him and you men will never hear a thing about this. Now, everyone of you realize this—that you are all a party to murder. Any deviation from my orders means you will be exposed to the police. It won't be healthy to cross me and it will be highly profitable to work with me.

"Within six months all of us will be rich beyond our wildest dreams. You will pay no attention to the police. Go on begging, act as though being molested by them is just a part of your life. If you are arrested, the magistrates will go soft and let you go again.

"When you hear the first bars of the 'Black Mass,' you will know it is time for us to meet

again—in this same place. Come as quickly as you can. Keep your eyes open, you that have them. Recruit as many of your kind to our ranks as possible, but be wary of spies.

"The police are clever enough, but compared with my brain they are stupid, incompetent fools. That's all for now. Slip out of here one by one, even if it takes you until morning to get clear. At our next meeting we shall have three times as many members."

Yancey stepped behind the makeshift desk, moved backward a few paces and vanished from sight as though he were a wraith. To the members of his newly formed organization there seemed to be an aura of the ghostly about this man who had assumed leadership. The way he appeared, the manner in which he seemed to know everything even down to Shannon, who was a spy, indicated that he hadn't been boasting; that his intellect was the superior one needed for leadership.

The audience of beggars did not realize that as Yancey backed away, the lights focused in their eyes had grown brighter and whiter, blinding them so they could not actually watch Yancey vanish. So far as they could distinguish, he dissolved into air.

Two of the thugs picked up Shannon. Another washed the blood away and sprinkled sawdust around where the floor was stained. The fourth took up a position at the door, wristwatch exposed. At regular intervals he sent one man away. The meeting was over, but the beggars had been duly impressed. They were ready for anything just so long as the future held in store for them plenty of money for liquor, drugs and race horses.

The most gigantic, daring band of murderers and criminals the world would ever know had been formed and baptized in a spray of blood. Some of the beggars shivered, some gloated. The blind were told in colorful terms just what had happened.

It was like the formation of a new cult—a blood cult—a league of the damned!

CHAPTER II
Blind Man Who Sees

IT was more of a mist than a rain. Norton Kirby, better known as "Silk," helped his master don a worn, rather seedy-looking topcoat. Silk was a slender, partially bald, man of about forty. His face rarely betrayed any expression at all.

"Going out in this weather!" he remonstrated. "It's not right! Oh, I know you've got to show yourself, sir, and with that Sergeant McGrath always snooping around, you can't just sit inside, but—" He added fervently: "I hope that guy falls off the curb and busts his fat neck someday."

"Now, now, Silk."

His employer grinned a little—a peculiar sort of grin for it did not light up his features much. Tony Quinn's eyes were blank, staring and dead looking.

His face, especially around the eyes, was horribly seared as though some white-hot branding iron had been repeatedly pressed against his flesh.

"Oh, go ahead and call me a fool," Silk grumbled, "but McGrath is dangerous. One of these days he'll trip you right and then—it'll be a cell for Tony Quinn. McGrath would give his right arm—both arms, I think—to land the Black Bat in jail."

"Quiet, Silk," Tony Quinn said softly. "It's best not to even mention that name. I'm just Tony Quinn, ex-district attorney, blinded for life in the line of duty. I'm disgusted with things. I sulk, I have no hope and—I am not the Black Bat. Understand that?"

Silk nodded and handed Quinn his cane.

"Okay. I get it, sir. Just be careful. It ain't only the police I'm afraid of, though. All they'll do is put the pinch on you, but if some of those hoods from the underworld ever tumbled to who you really were they'd blast you out in hot lead! I ought to travel with you, sir. Or anyway let me send for Butch and have him tag you."

Tony Quinn shook his head. "I'm going alone. A blind man must learn to shift for himself."

Quinn glanced in a mirror beside the door and for a brief second the blank deadness of his eyes vanished and they became very much alive. He laughed good-humoredly.

"I didn't realize that this topcoat was as shabby as it is," he murmured. "And the hat—looks as though the moths went to town on it. But that's quite all right A blind man wouldn't travel abroad looking like a fashion plate. Silk, if anybody drops two bits in my hat I'll bring you back a cigar. So long—and stop worrying, you professional killjoy."

Tony Quinn's cane tapped on the porch, signaled him when to descend the several steps to the wide, long path that led from his estate to the sidewalk. His head was high as he moved ahead, looking neither to the right nor the left. He donned a pair of dark glasses that partially covered the deep burns on his face and, unlatching the gate, turned left and selected the middle of the sidewalk as his path. Several pedestrians got out of his way and clucked their tongues sympathetically as he passed.

A policeman gave a rather unnecessary salute when he saw Quinn hesitating at the sidewalk curb and ran over to him. The patrolman felt just a little foolish after snapping his hand to the peak of his cap. Tony Quinn couldn't appreciate that honor—not with his eyes deader than Tutankhamen.

"Glad to see you about, Mr. Quinn," the patrolman

said affably. "A man's got to get around no matter if he ain't feelin' so hot. Here, let me help you cross the street."

THE patrolman blew a shrill blast on his whistle, held up his hand and traffic came to a standstill. He escorted Tony Quinn across the street, turned him in the right direction and then went back to his post to unsnarl the traffic.

A barely perceptible smile passed across Tony Quinn's lips. The police were pretty good guys at that. He wondered just how that patrolman would feel if he ever knew that he had helped the Black Bat across the street.

For Tony Quinn was the Black Bat. For years he had been a district attorney, fighting crime with the unwieldy hand of the law, impeded by its red tape and formality. Then, trying to protect vital evidence in a case, Quinn had been blinded by searing acid, flung into his eyes by a desperate criminal.

At that moment the world had become a place of darkness and despair for Tony Quinn. He resigned his position, visited doctors in this country and abroad. In every case he was told the same thing—that there was no hope. The acid had burned too deeply. He would never see again.

But miracles do happen: one night, when he was filled with the pangs of utter despair, a mystery girl had appeared. Through her, Tony Quinn had met a country doctor in a faraway State. There had been an operation—and Tony Quinn saw again!

Later he learned just why and how, but that was after the girl, Carol Baldwin, had become one of the Black Bat's most trusted aides. Her father, a law officer, had been paralyzed by bullets from a bandit mob. Dying, he had instructed that his healthy eyes be given to Tony Quinn.

From that moment on, Quinn had had a mission in life. Those who lived outside the law came to know a mysterious Nemesis of all crime, an eerie being who worked behind the protection of a mask and a cape which, partially outspread, looked much like the webbed wings of a bat. Steadily the name of the Black Bat came to be a phrase which made all the underworld shiver and look around in the night silences apprehensively.

And in this guise Tony Quinn found what he desired—a method of working against crime in an unhampered manner. His hands were not tied by such things as manmade laws. The Bat was his own jury and judge, his own detective bureau, coroner and scientist. He studied every known angle of crime and its solution.

Tony Quinn tapped his way along steadily. He shivered from the chill and drew up the coat collar of that flimsy, worn topcoat. Then he was aware of a car following him, riding close to the curb while men inside watched him closely. Quinn sucked in a quick breath. Perhaps Silk's hunch had been right. Perhaps, somehow, gangland had learned his identity and these men were emissaries sent to wreak an unholy vengeance on the Black Bat.

The car stopped and one man climbed out. He approached Quinn and grabbed his arm not too gently.

"Hi yuh, buddy," he said. "Kinda tough gettin' around, without bein' able to see, huh? Suppose I buy you a nice dinner some place. You look as if you ain't stowed away a good meal in weeks. Beggin's pretty tough since the police closed down, ain't it?"

Tony Quinn fell into the role of beggar smoothly.

"Yeah, you're talkin', buddy. Seems like them bluecoats are set on runnin' us all outta town."

"Come on," the other man said suavely. "I got a couple of pals and a car waitin'. We'll take a little ride and maybe you'll learn somethin'. Trouble with guys like you is you need a leader—somebody to do your thinkin'. Now I don't like the police any more'n you do, so we'll get together, huh?"

QUINN'S heart was pounding.

What kind of a puzzle had he falen into? This man was certainly not a respected citizen. He almost reeked of prison and crime. Also, Tony Quinn had found things much too quiet of late—so far as the Black Bat was concerned—it almost seemed as though crime had taken a holiday. This mysterious meeting sent his blood racing.

"Yeah, sure, buddy, I'll travel along and listen," he said eagerly. "You put me wise how I can eat regular an' I'll do anythin' you say."

Quinn was helped down the curb and into the car. He sat between two men—the one who had stopped him and an equally brutal-looking mug. Quinn's throat was dry. This might be a ruse to get him away from the city to a quiet spot where a bullet would end his life. Yet he also sensed that these men were earnest about it all, not using the hesitating, uncertain motions of subterfuge.

The car rolled into a park and stopped at a dark, lonesome spot. Quinn sat with his cane between his knees, staring straight ahead. The man who had stopped him shoved his hat to the back of his head and talked.

"Here's the setup, see?" he began. "Like I said, the police are forcin' guys like you offa the streets, preventin' you from makin' a honest livin'. Okay—you go on relief and starve to death with no dough to buy a snort or two when you feel like havin' one. So we got a big idea, see? We organize guys like you. We show them bluecoats where to get off—and there won't be any beggin' to the racket, either. Somethin' better and bigger. Catch on?"

Tony Quinn wagged his head helplessly from side to side.

"No, I don't get it. Organization might be a good thing, sure. Me, I'll try anythin', but I don't get the drift."

"Spill it," the second man said. "He's on the up-and-up. I can tell."

"Okay—listen now. You keep on walkin' the streets just like always. Don't pay any attention to the police. One of these days you'll hear a guy with a harmonica or maybe a violin or a hand organ playin' the Black Mass. Ever hear that tune? No, I don't think so. But we're ready to show you how it sounds. Got a recording here. Now, when you hear that tune, you—"

The door was suddenly pulled open and Quinn had to restrain himself from looking in that direction. He noticed, out of the corner of his eyes, that the driver was peering inside the sedan. And Tony Quinn knew that driver as Joe Cadell. He had been instrumental in sending the crook to prison for four years. What made things worse, Cadell was not apt to have forgotten.

Cadell reached into the car and pulled Quinn's glasses off. Then he muttered a curse.

"I thought this bird looked familiar," he said. "You two guys picked a swell number this time. Know who he is? Beggar, huh! The hell he is! That guy happens to be Tony Quinn, the D.A. who put me away for four years. I remember, he was blinded when Oliver Snate tried to make a getaway in court? This guy is blind, sure, but he'd just listen and the cops would know all about this one hour after you let him go."

TONY QUINN was struck across the face with the fist of one thug's hand. He cowered back, imitating a helpless blind man perfectly. There was no use trying to conceal his identity any longer.

"You men are mad," he said curtly. "What kind of a crazy organization is this? You spill this fairy tale to all the crippled beggars. You get them to kick in with a percentage of their take and you live off the fat of the land. It's a smart scheme, but it's over now."

"Latour"—the driver indicated the thug who had stopped Quinn—"we gotta do somethin' about this and it's gotta be good. If we knock him off, headquarters will maybe tumble there's somethin' big gonna bust loose. I think you oughta call the chief."

"But how?" Latour argued. "I don't know who he is or where to get hold of him except that phone number he gave us for emergencies."

"Ain't this an emergency?" Cadell rasped. "Go on—beat it across the park to the bandstand. There's a phone there. Scram, will you—or do I rub out this lousy D.A. right now?"

CHAPTER III
The Black Bat's Decision

LATOUR climbed out of the car and sprinted away into the darkness. Quinn licked his lips and wondered just what to do next. Then a gun was prodding his ribs and Cadell, the ex-convict, had another weapon in his fist.

These men were primed to kill, for unwittingly they had revealed some secret which meant their very existence. To suddenly lunge forward and drop his guise of a blind man might work if there had been only one man to face, but with two it was suicidal. There was nothing to do but sit it out and hope for a break.

Latour returned in about twenty minutes, puffing and bright-eyed in excitement.

"I got him okay," he panted. "He says this guy has gotta be knocked off quick. I swore I didn't tell him about the Black Mass. I figured he might think we was saps so I just said we propositioned him, but Cadell recognized his mug before we told him anythin'."

"Yeah," Cadell grunted, "that's usin' your head. The boss ever finds out just how much this bird did learn, he's liable to rub us out. This ain't no petty larceny business we're horning into. Okay—now we got to figure out how to knock him off and make it look like an accident."

"The boss figured it out for us," Latour gloated. "Boy, he's a smart guy all right. Quinn is blind as a bat, see? He—"

Cadell shivered. "Stop saying that word. It's the only thing I'm afraid of—the Bat. If that guy ever gets wind of this, I'm getting out—fast. Okay, spill the rest of it."

"Like I said," Latour went on, "Quinn is blind so most anythin' could happen to him, see? Here's the angle. We take him down to the harbor. We don't damage him none so there won't be any marks. We tie two big sacks of salt around his belly. It weights him down, keeps him under until he croaks and for a couple of days after that. The salt melts, the ropes ain't got much pressure on them anymore, and they come off. So do the sacks and he comes up again—stiff. Nothin' to show anythin' happened except he went for a walk along a pier and fell into the drink. Now is that a smart idea?"

Cadell hurried to the front of the car and climbed behind the wheel. He sent the car rolling toward the river while Latour deftly inserted a gag between Quinn's lips. He kept chuckling at the clever method of murder by which there would not be a single clue. And Quinn groaned inwardly. If this devilishly shrewd means of murder came from the man who bossed these killers, he was certainly no

ordinary gutter rat, but a man of intelligence and foresight. The murder of Tony Quinn would turn the whole Police Department loose on a hunt. But if blind Tony Quinn just tumbled off the end of a pier—well, that was just too bad.

If these killers simply weighted him down with sacks of salt, properly attached to his body, there would not be a clue. The contents of the sacks would dissolve in the water. The sacks would grow lighter and lighter and all the while the tide would keep churning Tony Quinn's body around until the ropes became detached and he would rise to the surface—just as they had figured it out.

THE car stopped along a dark street. The driver disappeared for a few minutes and returned, bending under the weight of a sack of salt. He made three more stops and threw the four sacks of salt into the back of the car. Then he drove on again until they reached a deserted pier, far uptown and away from the harbor traffic and the pier guards.

Quinn was forced out of the car, held at gun point while the sacks were also hauled out. Then he was neatly tripped. Cadell did the fancy work. He merely rolled Quinn in lengths of rope so that they would easily fall away once the weight of the salt sacks was removed. Quinn's gag was taken from his lips, but Latour held a gun at Quinn's temple.

"You make one sqawk and I'll bust your skull wide open with a thirty-eight, wiseguy," he promised. "Sittin' there so nice and proper, lettin' us spill everything we know. Well, you can tell it to the fishes, see? You're goin' in the drink, but that ain't so tough—for you. There's no use livin' if you can't see, anyhow. We're doin' you a favor, pal. Sure, a favor. Okay, boys, roll him over to the edge and make it snappy. We don't want nobody spottin' us."

Quinn was rolled and dragged to the edge of the pier, balanced there a second, and then Cadell put a foot against the small of his back.

"Remember the day you told a jury what a bum I was? I promised myself I'd get back at you and here it is. You can't see so you don't know much what's goin' to happen. You're right on the end of a pier and I'm booting you into the river. You'll sink like you was made of lead and stay on the bottom for a couple of days. When you come up, they'll tag you as an accident case. All the police will come to your funeral. Maybe I'll come, too. I never been to the funeral of a guy I knocked off."

Quinn said nothing. His brain was too actively trying to figure a way out to bother with answers. The ropes were wound around his middle so that his hands from the wrist down were free enough. But what good were they? He had been searched and anything with which he might cut himself loose had been taken away. It looked like the finish. Before he could hope to wriggle out of the coil of rope, the water would have taken care of him.

Cadell gave a snort of anger and sent Quinn tumbling off the pier. He struck the water and the weight of those salt sacks took him to the bottom in less than five seconds.

As the water closed around his head, Quinn tried to extricate himself from the windings of ropes. It was impossible. He hit the muddy bottom of the river, felt something prod his back painfully and by kicking his legs hard, managed to see what this was: a tin can, its rusty jagged edge protruding above the silt.

People who lived near this pier threw their refuse into the water and for the first time in his life Quinn blessed such careless people. He rolled over, holding his breath until he thought his lungs would burst. Dragging one sack close to the sharp edge of the can he slit the sack from end to end.

He tackled the second, the third and then the fourth sack. They were bulging with salt and now that the water acted on the crystals, the cheap burlap was stretched to its utmost so that the edge of the can cut through it easily and quickly.

THE salt oozed out. Quinn felt himself start to rise. He gulped in dirty water, shot to the surface and found himself directly beneath the pier. He heard the three killers hurrying back to their car, heard its motor hum and the tires rolled along the wooden pier until the sound finally vanished completely.

Quinn wound his arms around a sunken pillar, sucked in air and shook the dizzy feeling that gripped him. As his strength returned, he rapidly unwound the coil of rope from his waist and body, climbed the pole and pulled himself on the pier.

It was about ten-thirty and he knew that the chances of anyone's coming were few. He lay there for fully fifteen minutes, basking in the thoughts of his luck and the strength of his body that had permitted him to remain underwater so long without drowning.

Finally he arose, wrung out his clothes as best he could and glanced to his left. The night was pitch dark and to ordinary eyes nothing was visible in the blackness. But Tony Quinn's eyes were not ordinary. That operation which had restored his sight had repaid him for the months of real blindness. Tony Quinn, by some miracle of the surgeon's work, could see in the dark as well, or better, than in bright sunlight. He made out a watchman's shack at the end of the pier. There should be a phone there. There was. He broke into the shack by the simple expedient of seizing the padlock hinge and yanking it out of the dry, worn wood. Quinn dialed a number.

"Silk," he said in a low voice, "how right you were! This was my unlucky night— or, perhaps, my lucky one. I'm not sure yet. Three mugs tried to murder me. Get in touch with Butch. Have him drive the coupé to Pier Ninety-seven, North River. I'll be waiting for him. And Silk, send for Carol. Have her wait for me with you, in the house. Have a hot toddy ready. I've been for a swim and my teeth are beginning to chatter."

Silk started to ask a million questions, but the connection was cut off abruptly. Silk immediately raced toward the paneled wall in the living room, hesitated and then turned back to pull all the shades in the room.

He pressed a spring in the wall then. A section of the wall opened and he entered a neat, white-tiled laboratory crammed with all the chemicals and apparatus necessary for a scientific fight against crime. He pressed another control and the floor yawned open in one spot. Silk slid down a ladder, raced along a tunnel and emerged in a gatehouse near the rear of Tony Quinn's estate.

This secret means of entering or leaving the house provided Quinn and his staff with a method of escaping both police and possible crooks who might have the house under observation.

Glancing up and down the quiet street, Silk kept to the shadows of the wall and finally reached a sedate boarding house. He crouched behind a hedge, whistled softly and saw lights flash on in one of the upper rooms.

A moment later and Jack O'Leary, known familiarly as "Butch," stood by the window looking out. He made no sign that he had heard the whistled signal. Instead he calmly put on his hat and coat, left the house with an explanation to the landlady that he was going for a ride, and proceeded toward the cheap coupé that was always parked at the curb in front of the house. He got in, drove down the street and picked up Silk.

BUTCH was a huge man, built like an ox. He had practically no neck at all, a wide, unhandsome face and hands that resembled a boxer's fists— with the gloves on. Silk gave him brief, precise instructions, dropped off the car a block further, and watched Butch drive away.

Then Silk walked toward a corner on which there was a drugstore. He bought a pack of cigarettes, looked around and walked casually into the phone booth. He dialed a number and breathed a sigh of relief when a friendly, warm voice answered.

"Carol, something's up. Report to the house at once. No, he's all right. I'm positive because he talked to me a few minutes ago. Hurry."

Thirty minutes later Tony Quinn, clad in a lounging robe and sipping frequently from a mug of steaming whiskey and hot water, surveyed his three aides. He grinned at them, looked at Carol Baldwin intently, thinking for more than the thousandth time just how lovely she was. Her blond hair and blue eyes always made Quinn grateful anew for the return of his eyesight. If for nothing else than to see her, it had all been worthwhile.

"Well," he said flnally, "we're up against a strange and difficult proposition. I've told you what happened and how I got away. Perhaps all this means nothing more than the formation of a racket having to do with beggars. I'd be certain of it if my friend Latour hadn't spoken of a man he called the boss. A clever, ruthless person, this man who employs Latour. I doubt he would be mixed up in anything trivial."

"But, Tony," Carol said impulsively, "how will you be able to handle this case? To all appearances you're dead—at the bottom of the harbor." Carol shivered at the idea. "And if those crooks know you are alive—"

Quinn shrugged. "I'll have to chance it. Of one thing I am sure—none of the three men who tried to murder me will tell their leader that they more or less spilled the beans about that song, the Black Mass. Know it, Carol? But no, you wouldn't. It's a dirge. You should know only the gay tunes."

He smiled at all three of them. "You know, I can never entirely express my thanks for the fate that gave me three friends like you. Silk, who came to rob me one night and remained to become an invaluable aide and a close friend.

"You, Butch, whose act of bravery gave me the urge to save you from death at the hands of a gang of killers. You, too, I learned to trust and depend upon. And Carol, who gave me back my sight.

"I'll hold nothing from any of you. There is but one thing I can do—pretend that a stroke of good luck saved me from drowning, go to Police Commissioner Warner and my old friend and enemy, Detective Sergeant McGrath. I'll tell them exactly what happened, leaving out the business about the Black Mass. They may know something of all this and be able to help me without realizing it.

"Tony Quinn isn't dead—and neither is the Black Bat! Latour, Cadell and the third mug will find that out very shortly. Now, Carol, you and Butch go back to your rooms and stay there. Silk, get on the phone and call Commissioner Warner. Tell him I just stumbled into the house, half dead. Tell him someone tried to murder me. He'll come—fast. So will McGrath, and we'll have a nice little chat."

CAROL and Butch made their way out of the house via the secret tunnel. They didn't argue about

Quinn's instructions, for it was not Tony Quinn who gave them. The Black Bat had returned! They obeyed his orders explicitly and without question.

Silk picked up the phone and called Police Commissioner Warner. Tony Quinn walked over to a deep leather chair in front of the fireplace. He picked up his cane, put it between his legs and those flashing eyes of his became staring and blind.

Temporarily, the Black Bat had passed out of existence. Blind, helpless Tony Quinn waited for the police so that he might tell them how three men had tried to murder him.

He smiled a little as Silk delivered the message. Smoothness was Silk's greatest asset. He had once been a confidence man of the highest order—without a police record, and leaving behind him a host of men who had lost their money catering to their own greed. Silk knew how to handle people, knew how to delve beneath their skins. He had given all this up when he had become Tony Quinn's valet and aide, but his suave, smooth manner still functioned and the Black Bat had found it useful more than once.

"He's coming, sir," Silk said as he began raising the window shades. "So is Sergeant McGrath. I'm afraid McGrath is going to be pretty inquisitive. He might wonder just why three killers should select a helpless, blind man to murder and how coincidental it was that you are that blind man. McGrath knows, deep down, that you are the Black Bat, and he has sworn to keep after you until he can prove it."

Tony Quinn laughed quietly. "McGrath is a good policeman. He's as honest as a man can be—even with himself. He'll run me in if he ever proves I am the Bat—but I'm banking that he never does. Show them in when they arrive and you'd better fuss around like the old woman you are, pretending you're all worried about me."

Silk's lips compressed into a tight line. "Yes, sir. And I don't mind telling you it won't be any pretense. Once those killers learn you didn't drown, they may come after you again."

Tony Quinn nodded slowly. "Yes, Silk. I sincerely hope so!"

CHAPTER IV
Silk Loses An Arm

COMMISSIONER of Police Warner, lean, grey-haired and capable-looking, entered Tony Quinn's house first and there was a distinct note of worry in his greeting. Detective Sergeant McGrath, behind him, was openly derisive.

McGrath was about forty-five, beefy-faced, chunky and yet extremely fast on the move. There was a determined jutting slant to his chin and his eyes were always narrowed in suspicion when he saw Tony Quinn. For Sergeant McGrath would have wagered his gold shield that Quinn was the nocturnal prowler known as the Black Bat!

Even though McGrath gave the Black Bat doubtful respect, admitting he had solved many crimes that stumped every law agency, he also insisted that in solving those crimes the Black Bat had broken the law himself.

McGrath upheld the law—to its exact letter. He even carried a book of parking tickets in his pocket and any motorist who happened to park in a limited area would find one hooked to his car door. Traffic police gave parkers a little leeway. So did McGrath—two minutes and no more.

Quinn shook hands with the men from Police Headquarters, motioned vaguely toward chairs, and began talking.

"I went for my usual evening walk," he said promptly, "and near Tremont Drive a car pulled up and a man got out. He asked me several silly questions, gave me no chance to argue and piloted me to the car. I was driven off. There were, I think, two men besides the driver. Anyway they thought that because of my—affliction—that I was a beggar. It so happened my coat and hat were old and soiled, so perhaps I looked like one."

"Beggars!" Commissioner Warner's face went white and even McGrath started appreciably. "Are you sure, Tony? Were they trying to enlist you into some organization or other?"

Tony Quinn's tone of voice showed his surprise. "Why, yes, they did. How in the world—"

"Because we've been trying to figure out a rather strange thing that's happened recently," Warner broke in. "It's like this, Tony: beggars in this city play the public to the tune of fifteen million dollars annually. That sounds absurd, I know, but it's a concrete fact. We have undertaken to drive all beggars from the streets. Nine-tenths of them are fakes anyway, choosing this manner of existence because it pays them well. Some have bank accounts that would make your eyes—I mean—would surprise you."

Tony Quinn laughed dryly. "Never mind the hesitancy or apologetic stammerings when you refer to my eyes, commissioner. I'm quite used to the fact that I'm blind. Keep on talking, please. All this intrigues me."

Sergeant McGrath stepped in front of Quinn suddenly. He had picked up a book and was holding it carelessly between his fingers. He turned as if to address Warner and the book fell out of his hand. It dropped squarely into Tony Quinn's lap, but his blank eyes didn't flicker once, nor did he make the

slightest instinctive motion to catch the falling book.

McGrath was always playing those tricks, desperately trying to prove that Tony Quinn's blindness was a fraud, no matter what a score of highly paid specialists had testified to.

"Sergeant," Commissioner Warner snapped angrily, "you'll step back. That confounded suspicious nature of yours is beginning to irk me no end. How many more of those fiascos must you attempt before you realize that Tony Quinn really is blind? That he can't see at all? That he couldn't possibly be the Black Bat?"

"Sorry," McGrath mumbled. "I—I didn't mean it that way. You see, I—"

Tony Quinn was staring blankly about three feet to McGrath's left.

"Please, Sergeant, don't apologize. I know you suspect me and I appreciate the honor. It makes my otherwise monotonous existence much more thrilling. I never know when you'll pop in and tell me I've been out shooting or punching somebody. If I can be of help—"

"Sure," McGrath snapped. "Tell me just how you knew that car pulled up near Tremont Drive. How'd you know where you were?"

Quinn's thin lips parted in a smile and the scars around his eyes gleamed as the flesh wrinkled.

"Come now, Sergeant. You are a detective. Don't you see a blind man learns to count each step, to mentally visualize exactly where he is? Then he won't fall down curbs or bash himself against a tree. It's instinct, I suppose."

WARNER waved McGrath aside angrily and leaned forward.

"As I was saying, Tony," he went on, "the Welfare Board, headed by Commissioner Phil Manderson, is trying desperately to get rid of these beggars, clean our streets of them. I issued orders three weeks ago that every beggar was to be first warned to desist from begging and then arrested if no heed was paid to those orders. My men warned them as did all the newspaper publicity.

"What I can't understand is why most of them obeyed instantly. The few who did keep on grifting really are cripples and—and blind men. The frauds stopped as if they'd suddenly grown afraid of the law, and you know beggars rarely assume any attitude like that."

Tony Quinn grunted in surprised agreement.

"Yes—yes, I understand that. Now I haven't much to add. The man who stopped me indicated that I could join some organization for the protection of beggars. That's as far as he got when the driver of the car apparently recognized me as an ex-district attorney. I was thrown to the bottom of the car, taken to a pier and dumped off the edge.

"They talked as though they hoped my death would look like suicide. Fortunately I am a strong swimmer and luck was with me. I found the ladder leading to the pier as I came up. Naturally I climbed it. Someone answered my calls for help and I was brought home in a cab. Odd that they would have tried to murder me when I really knew nothing."

"Wait a minute!" Sergeant McGrath could contain himself no longer. While Quinn talked, his face had grown redder and redder. He stepped forward. "You say the driver of the car recognized you? Maybe you sent him up some time or other and he had it in for you. But if he recognized you, there ain't no reason why you didn't recognize him. Who was he?"

Tony Quinn laughed aloud at that one. "Sergeant, I knew you only slightly when I was district attorney and had all my faculties. Yet you stand near me right now and I couldn't swear on my oath that you were Detective Sergeant McGrath. The driver of the car was in a similar position. Perhaps I had known him, known what he looked like, but now, you see, I'm not in a very good position to identify people. You couldn't, either—if the blackest sort of darkness held a film over your eyes."

COMMISSIONER WARNER arose. He stepped up to McGrath and waved a finger under his nose.

"You're absolutely stupid, McGrath. You haven't either the decency or sense of a jackass. If you don't stop this infernal quibbling, trying to make Tony Quinn stumble over one of your stupid tricks, I'll have you broken and put on a beat. In fact I think I'll let you know just how I feel now. You're assigned as a special member of the Mendicancy Squad and ordered to track down the men who murdered Detective Shannon."

"Shannon?" Tony Quinn broke in. "Young Shannon, who helped me break that Jocelyn case wide open? Murdered?"

Warner sighed and returned to his chair.

"We found him thrown on top of a public dump, his throat slit from ear to ear. That's why I'm so worried, Tony. Shannon was working undercover, posing as a beggar to get us statistics about beggars and discover how they reacted toward the edict driving them from the streets. He must have found something hot—and died before he could make any report."

Tony Quinn's hands, resting against his cane, grew white around the knuckles.

"Then perhaps there is something to this organization I was told about. Oh, damn it, Commissioner, if I had my eyes—"

Warner glared at McGrath and got up hastily.

"Stop it, Tony. When you were able to see, you did everything possible to prevent and punish crime. You were blinded in the line of duty and you are sensible enough to realize that there is nothing to be done about it now. However, you can help—as you frequently have already. You possess a keen mind; a legal mind. Mull over the details and see if anything ties up. Let me know if you can make any suggestions."

"Of course," Quinn said. "I'm sorry I went off the handle like that. By the way, just what are your intentions toward these beggars? You can't simply allow them to starve."

"Commissioner Manderson is seeing to that," Warner explained. "He has already converted the old Twenty-ninth Armory into a big rooming house for cripples. There they will receive food and lodging, be given medical treatment and also lessons in various trades to which they might be fitted. The Great City Fund is raising fifteen million dollars to help in that worthy cause. It's the biggest thing the Welfare Department has ever attempted. Now about you, Tony—I'm not going to make any report about that attempted murder yet. It might be dangerous if those men knew you were alive. They might attempt it again." Warner picked up Quinn's hand, shook it and then nudged McGrath with considerable force. Silk, at the front door, bowed politely as they went out. But when the door closed, he made a derisive sound with his tongue and his lips. That was for McGrath's benefit.

"Well, Silk," Quinn said slowly, "what do you think of all this?"

"Not so much," Silk said. "Looks like the beggars are just organizing to fight the idea of clearing them off the streets. Most of those grifters wouldn't work if they were paid the President's salary. They picked you up because you looked like a beggar—my fault, too, for letting you go out with those old clothes on. That driver recognized you, had a yen to pay you back for putting him in stir and—well, they dumped you in the drink."

TONY QUINN gestured, and Silk drew the curtains. Then Quinn arose and began pacing the floor nervously.

"You're wrong, Silk," he said, after a few moments' deep thought. "It's much more than that. You forget the Black Mass, that dirge they use as a signal. You forget there is a leader who is remarkably clever. The instructions he gave for my finish indicates that. There is something behind it—something big. Silk, it's time for the Black Bat to fly again!

"Those beggars, and the men who lead them, have thrown down the gauntlet. It's a distinct challenge to all law enforcement agencies—a challenge to the Black Bat. I'm picking it up, partly because I'm curious, partly because I'd like a crack at that man Cadell who spotted me and—there is always Detective Shannon. A nice boy—married and with two children. He was murdered in cold blood because he knew too much and when crooks resort to murder then they have something important up their sleeves.

"Get your hat and coat. Take a taxi downtown to one of those secondhand phonograph record stores. It's probably one of the few places you can pick up a recording of the Black Mass. Also buy me a harmonica. Hurry back.

The next day, mournful notes echoed through Tony Quinn's hidden laboratory. Silk, who had little music in his blood, fought to master the dirge on a harmonica. He had spent half the night at that same task and it was twenty hours later before Quinn gave the signal that Silk had perfected the dismal tune.

"It's a little known piece of music," he explained, "which probably accounts for the gang selecting it as their signal and theme song. No one else is apt to be playing it. In three hours it will be quite dark. Then we begin our little act. You're going to lose one arm, Silk. Your left arm because you may need your right to defend yourself."

Silk gulped. "My arm? I—I don't understand, sir."

Quinn laughed. "We'll bind it to your side, beneath your clothing, so no one will be able to tell that you possess two good arms. Peel off your clothes and we'll get to it."

CHAPTER V
The Musical Code

AT seven o'clock that night Silk, clad in dirty, wrinkled clothing with an empty left sleeve pinned to his coat, turned a corner and began walking slowly up a busy thoroughfare. He clutched a harmonica in his right hand and a tin cup was suspended around his neck.

The stubble of beard on his chin, the glistening scar that ran from the corner of his right eye in a half moon fashion to the upper right lip gave him a sinister appearance. That scar was a work of art and Tony Quinn was proud of himself for inventing it. Even Sergeant McGrath would never have recognized Silk.

A cheap coupé was parked at the curb and Silk stopped about twenty feet from it, hunched himself against the wall of a building and began to play a gay tune on his harmonica. In the coupé, Tony Quinn watched narrowly. From across the street

Butch O'Leary, parked at a cigar counter in a small store, idly turned the sport pages of a newspaper, but his eyes were watching Silk.

A girl, lovely and gracious, stepped out of the surging crowd, walked up to Silk and dropped a dime into his tin cup. Her lips barely moved.

"Silk, you're the dirtiest, most disreputable-looking person I've ever seen—and the best actor," she announced.

"Orders now. When you see a beggar or cripple approach, play the Black Mass, and if you are questioned by any cripple, tell him he is to go to the usual meeting place."

"Thank you, Miss," Silk said humbly. "God bless you, Miss."

Carol Baldwin walked away slowly. As she neared the further corner, she saw a legless man scooting along on his wheeled platform, mounted on roller skates. The man's wide face was scowling in rage. Apparently Silk had appropriated someone's spot to beg.

Carol turned to peer into a window and at the same time keep Silk under observation. Tony Quinn, behind the wheel of the coupé, saw it too. He was dressed all in black now with a wide brimmed black hat turned down to hide the scars etched into his flesh.

The legless beggar wheeled himself expertly through the crowd and, using his hands as brakes, stopped at Silk's feet. He looked up with a snarled oath coming from his lips.

"Scram, you chiseler. This is my block, get me?"

Silk didn't reply. Instead, the harmonica held between his lips dealt forth a change of tune—the dismal notes of the Black Mass. Instantly the legless man's attitude changed.

"Say, bud, I didn't get it, see? No offense. I figured you was just some new guy from the sticks tryin' to horn in. What's up?"

Silk removed the harmonica from between his lips, looked down at the half a man and spoke in a hoarse, whiskey tenor.

"The usual spot—and in a hurry! Things are getting hot."

The legless man gave his wheeled platform a shove, scooted between the crowd and traveled at full speed north on the avenue. He turned the next corner and paid no attention to the pretty girl who followed him. Three blocks further on she vanished from sight and a huge, lumbering man took her place. He, too, turned off, but this time a cheap coupé rolled slowly along, keeping the legless man in sight.

The beggar slowed up along an evilly lighted waterfront street. He wheeled himself in a circle, looking in every direction, then gave himself a hard shove down an alley. The coupé stopped, the figure in black emerged and also vanished into the darkness of that alley.

FOR the present, Tony Quinn, blind ex-district attorney, had vanished off the face of the Earth and his place was taken by a being garbed in black, with a cloak that resembled the ribbed wings of a bat on his shoulders and a hood and mask over his head. The Black Bat had risen again!

An hour later Silk, still parked against the wall of the downtown business building, sent his last beggar scooting to the meeting place. He had counted twenty-seven men who had obeyed the command emphasized by the mournful notes of the Black Mass. That was enough to prove this really was a big, strong organization.

He dumped the contents of his tin cup into his pocket and grinned. No one had need to call himself a pauper in this racket. Within one hour a dollar and ninety cents had clanked into the cup.

By now the Black Bat must know where the beggars were holed up and what some of their motives were. That would be enough to start things rolling smoothly. Silk's job was done for the moment.

He stuffed the harmonica into his pocket and headed toward the center of the sidewalk. His bound arm, lashed to his side, had become numb minutes before. It was beginning to ache slightly now.

Then he saw a car pull up with brakes squealing. Two men jumped out and Silk instantly sensed his peril. But it was too late to run for it and he could not raise an alarm. If a patrolman did rescue him, there would be questions, possibly a search and when he was found to possess two healthy arms, no telling what would happen. At the best, Sergeant McGrath might come to give him the once over and under McGrath's keen eye, Silk would be exposed.

The two men converged on him from two different directions, cutting off all hope of flight. Silk braced himself, clenched the fingers of his free hand into a tight fist and prayed that he could get in one healthy blow, floor one of the thugs and make his escape.

He swung a short jab, missed and something whizzed by his ear. It struck his shoulder and almost smashed it. The next time the blackjack did not miss. It connected with Silk's skull and he flopped to the sidewalk. He was dimly aware of being picked up, heard harsh warning shouts from his captors and they sounded as though they were miles away. He was thrown into the back of the car. The two men piled in after him and the car darted off into the traffic.

In the meantime the Black Bat had slipped down the alley and the intense darkness meant nothing to

him. His eyes gleamed now, and penetrated the shadows as if they didn't exist. For him it was as if the alley were flooded with sunlight instead of darkness. He saw the legless man roll toward a nail-studded door, rap on it with his knuckles and then draw back to wait for it to open.

Nothing happened and the cripple growled a lurid oath. He rapped again, waited a full three minutes, then headed back out of the alley. Intense rage showed on his face. He did not turn back in the direction from where he had come. Instead he headed due south, apparently with a set destination in mind.

Across the street Butch, merged with the shadows of a doorway, caught the signal given by the Black Bat. He followed the beggar carefully while the Black Bat peeled off his cloak and hood, drew on the black hat and slipped along the sidewalk to where his coupé was parked. Then he took over the legless man's trail from Butch.

He scooted more than fifteen blocks before he brought himself to a quick halt outside the doors of a noisy cafe. He pursed his lips and whistled—an off key rendition of the Black Mass.

A MAN emerged from the cafe, wiping his hands on his apron. He was either a waiter or bartender. He bent down and listened while the legless man delivered his message. Then the aproned one spun around, darted back into the cafe and hurried to a phone booth.

Ten minutes later, a big car pulled up to the curb and two men alighted. The Black Bat, parked half a block away, recognized them and his lips compressed themselves into a thin line.

Cadell was one of these men and the other was Latur, the hulking brute who had suggested that Tony Quinn join the beggar's league. They talked to the legless man for a moment. Another car rolled up and two more men got out. Surrounding the cripple they carried on a rapid-fire conversation in voices too low for even the Black Bat's sensitive ears to distinguish. Two men got back into a car and drove off. The other two picked up the legless man, deposited him in the tonneau of the second car and were off.

The Black Bat followed this last car, wondering just what the two men in the first sedan were up to.

Oddly enough the trail took the Black Bat straight back to that alley. The legless man was hauled out and scooted up the street while Cadell and his companion darted down the alley, unlocked the studded door and vanished inside.

Seated in his coupé, the Black Bat watched all this and tried to puzzle out his next move. To invade that meeting place at this particular moment would gain him nothing and possibly risk a dangerous exposure. He decided to sit tight for the moment, and ten minutes later he had cause to bless this instinctive urge.

One by one, beggars drifted down the street and vanished into the mouth of the alley to be admitted through that door. Finally the legless man returned, eagerly toiling his way down the street. After he was gone, the Black Bat stepped out of the car, became a dark blob of shadow and stopped halfway down the alley to put on his cloak and his hood.

He stepped quietly to the door and pressed an ear against the panels. He could hear stern voices, but they were too far away for him to distinguish the words. The Black Bat tried the door gently, but it was locked. He recalled the manner in which the legless man had rapped on the panels.

With bated breath he repeated the signal, heard bolts slide back and an uncouth, brutal-looking stranger leered out at him. This man had only one real hand. The other was a hook and the Black Bat saw that it had been sharpened to the keenness of a sickle, which it closely resembled.

The door guard peered out into the darkness, grumbling to himself. Then a brawny arm shot out of the shadows, curled around his neck and stifled the yell that rose to his lips. A short, scientifically delivered punch put the guard completely out of the picture.

The Black Bat hustled him over to a pile of big, dusty packing cases and stuffed him inside one of them. The Black Bat straightened up and listened. Months of blindness had made his ears extremely sensitive, and now he could hear the voices and make out the words.

But the short meeting was over. The Black Bat heard only Cadell's closing words.

"SPREAD out and tell the rest of the League. One more thing—and get this right. Tonight, in about an hour from now, that damned Welfare Department is giving a dinner and spilling a lot of hooey at the new joint they remodeled for you mugs. The police are telling every beggar and cripple to be there or else. Well, those of us who are in the know will stay away. Get that? Stay away, or you'll be damned sorry. We won't have to drop you from membership in the League—that won't be necessary. Now scram outta here."

The men hobbled, rolled or tapped their way across the floor to the door. Someone grumbled about the guard having left, but they did not look for him nor grow suspicious. They filed out of the place rapidly.

Cadell and his companion headed for the door, too. Suddenly Cadell gripped his partner's arm.

"D-did you see anything?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. "Over there near the door?"

A brawny arm curled around the guard's neck.

"Naw! For the luvamike, Cadell, don't be so jumpy. You got that Black Bat on your mind too much. The devil with him! He don't know what we're up to. How can he? We don't even know ourselves."

"B-but something seemed to just fly out that door and I could have sworn it had wings. Wings—like a bat."

Cadell's companion howled in derision, closed the door and locked it. They headed up the alley, passing the slower moving cripples. It was all done cleverly. The beggars remained in the shadows and at five minute intervals one emerged to the street. Unless someone was posted to watch this particular alley, the presence of a number of beggars in one place would never have been noticed.

Then, out of the inky darkness, a blind man with his metal-capped cane tapping his way appeared. He wore dark, big-rimmed glasses and none of the beggars noticed that perhaps his clothes were a little too clean, a trifle too expensive. The darkness prevented that. The blind man's cane touched someone's extended arm and he stopped dead.

"Help a blind man," he said querulously. "Help a blind man. I'm lost."

"Listen," a man with one arm moved close to the blind man. "These are orders. But wait a minute! How'd you get here? Who told you to come?"

The blind man cocked his head to one side, as if listening intently. He pursed his lips and softly whistled a few bars of the Black Mass. The one-armed beggar nodded.

"I was walking along Carmody Street," the blind man whispered. "I heard somebody playing the song. He told me there was an important meeting so I came right on down. What's the matter?"

"Plenty," the beggar whispered. "The guy who gave you that dope was a police stooge. There ain't no meeting tonight, see? The rest of us was fooled, too. But we got orders. After this, don't pay any attention to that song unless it's played on the violin or a hand organ. And don't go near the Welfare Commission's big meeting at the old armory that they turned into dormitories for us. Dormitories! Huh! Cells is more like it. Stay away, you hear? And spread the news. Now wait here and I'll tell you when you slip back to the street."

THE blind man nodded eagerly, allowed himself to be pulled into the shelter of a high fence and waited there until only the armless beggar remained. The blind man was told to wait ten minutes before venturing back to the street. The beggar reiterated the orders he had already stated and then slipped away.

He would have been more than shocked if he had watched that blind man transform himself into a healthy, ominous figure. The Black Bat hastily removed the dark glasses, turned down the brim of his hat and vaulted the fence. There he cut across old factory dumping grounds, littered with debris that would have tripped an ordinary man a dozen times, but the Black Bat's eyes easily picked out any obstructions.

Reaching his coupé, he got behind the wheel, then hesitated. The lieutenants in charge of this meeting had indicated that there might be some danger at the dedication ceremonies of the new d ormitory home for beggars. That could mean anything from stench bombs right up to the out-and-out murder of some official who was responsible for eradicating beggars from the streets. The Black Bat also knew that Silk might find himself in difficulties.

He glanced at his watch, saw that he had plenty of time to reach the dormitory, and headed south to pick up Silk. He rounded a corner, jerked down the brim of his hat as a patrolman glanced his way, and weaved in and out of the traffic, trying to make time without attracting any undue attention.

When he reached the spot where Silk had been posted, he saw only a crowd of people chattering. Two patrolmen were walking slowly away, making entries in their notebooks. Then the door beside the Black Bat opened and for half a second his heart ceased to beat. It was Carol.

She gripped the Black Bat's forearm tightly.

"Tony—oh, Tony, they've got Silk!" she said, a little hysterically. "Just as he was getting ready to leave, a car pulled up. Two men got out, ran over to Silk and struck him across the head with a blackjack. They picked him up, carried him to the car and then threatened the people who gaped at them with guns. I—I tried to follow, but the crowd was too thick. Before I could reach the curb and a taxi, they had vanished. I don't know what to do!"

The Black Bat's face was not pleasant to look upon. He wheeled the car into the traffic, drove it to a quiet street and parked. He took both Carol's hands in his own.

"You're not to worry, darling," he told her. "Silk is able to take care of himself and before long I'll be able to start looking for him. They won't kill him without finding out what his little game was. Silk knows that, and he'll stall."

"But aren't you going to look for him immediately?" Carol asked the Black Bat fearfully.

The Black Bat shook his head. "Can't be done—no matter how much I want to save him. Carol, I've learned that these beggars and their leaders plan some kind of a coup at the dormitory exercises. I don't know exactly what they intend doing, but it sounded bad to me. There will be hundreds of

people there—innocent people who may die just to satisfy some unholy whim on the part of the devil who controls those beggars. Silk is only one man—and he has known for months the risk entailed in his work. Silk would want it that way. Can't you see, Carol?"

SHE nodded mutely, but had difficulty in controlling her tears. The Black Bat got out of the car, ran around it and motioned Carol to take the wheel.

"Anyway," he assured her, "you've forgotten about Butch. I'm banking that the big lug had his eye on Silk and is after him by now. Here is what you must do: drive me to the old armory which has been converted into the new dormitories. Drop me off on a side street so I can reach the scene without being spotted. I hate to take the chance because I've a hunch McGrath and even Commissioner Warner will be present. However, there is no other way. Then you travel fast to my home, slip in through the gatehouse and the tunnel. Stay in the lab and wait for calls. I'll contact you the moment I'm free."

"Yes, Tony," she said quietly. "I'll go. And I'll promise to be brave, but I hope—"

The Black Bat patted her hand gently.

"Have I ever failed Silk yet?" he consoled. "Come on—brace up and let's travel."

CHAPTER VI
The Colors of Madness

SILK awoke to the rhythm of a purring motor. Someone grabbed him by the collar, jerked him into a sitting position and he was rapidly searched. He heard one of his captors grunt in surprise.

"Say, Royo, this guy's got two good arms the same as me. One of 'em is strapped to his side. It was a plant all right and I'm betting my cut on the first job that we got a police spy on our hands."

"That is true," the other man agreed in an accented voice. "That other police spy, Shannon, must have got in a report telling about us. Maybe there's a whole regiment of spies turned loose on our tail. A lot of good it'll do them. After we get through with a couple like this one, the others will turn yellow. Hit him hard so he won't put his nose out of a window and cry for help."

Silk was hurled back on the floor. A heavily shod foot cracked against the back of his head and he groaned despite himself. Another kick, squarely under the chin, settled things. Silk passed out.

But ten minutes later, Silk had recovered his wits to a certain extent. His legs felt wobbly even without standing on them. His head was spinning badly, but he was conscious. The two men who rode with him made careless examinations of Silk from time to time, but his limp position satisfied them.

Silk had not the vaguest idea as to where he was being taken. Flattened against the floor he could not see a thing. The roar of the motor prevented him from hearing much and he had only one sensory organ left—his nose. Silk definitely smelled salt water. Somewhere a big boat's whistle hooted twice.

The two men whose feet were planted near his face were talking again.

"We're taking a chance stepping on it like this because if a motorcycle guy ever tried to stop us, we'd have to give him the works. But they need this buggy back in town. Take a good look at it, Mex. You won't be seeing it again."

"Ah, *si,*" the man called Royo agreed. "Being stolen, they could never trace it—not even if there were pieces left, eh, *amigo? Per Dies,* our leader thinks deeply of all things. With him at our head we cannot lose."

The car left the highway five minutes later and jolted over a rough, rutted road. The smell of salt water was stronger than ever and as the car rolled to a stop, Silk heard the pounding of the surf. They were at some beach.

The two men climbed out. One of them seized Silk by the ankles and pulled him out of the car, letting his shoulders bang painfully against the running board. Silk landed in soft sand and did not move a muscle, but through slitted eyes he saw only two forms silhouetted against the sky above the ocean. In a moment others would come. It was now, or most decidedly, never.

Silk suddenly kicked out with both feet. One of the crooks gave a shout of pain and staggered back. Then Silk was up in a flash, heading for the second crook, a swarthy, leering Mexican.

But Silk had mistakenly gauged his own strength. Before he reached the man, his knees began to shake. He took a straight right to the face, reeled back and fell heavily on the sand. But he was up again before the two crooks could close in.

A third man was coming also—Silk had forgotten the driver. All three held inverted guns ready to smash against his skull.

SILK rolled away a couple of yards, managed to regain his feet, and made a last, desperate attempt at freedom. He headed for the car. His one hand clutched a fistful of sand to fling into the eyes of the killers. As he started to climb behind the wheel, a gun butt slashed down alongside his temple. Silk slumped down to hang half in and half out of the front seat. His fistful of sand and a small shell or

two seeped between his fingers onto the front seat of the car.

"Regular wildcat," one of the men snorted. "Better watch him. Come on, take his legs. We'll lug him straight to the house. Yancey is there now—waiting."

Silk's numbed senses could stand no more. He closed his eyes in resignation and made no effort to fight free. To do so would only invite those gun butts and a couple of more belts on the skull would probably finish him.

He was carried along a deserted beach, through a gate set in a high fence lined with tall, thick trees, and up a path made of sea shells. Someone held a door open and he was carried through a big kitchen, up a flight of stairs and then dumped into a big chair.

No one spoke. Everything seemed prearranged, as if this business had been done before—and often. Silk shivered. The place reeked of menace and horror.

Then a powerful light was turned on, centering straight into his eyes. He closed the lids quickly, but that light penetrated the thin flesh. He started to raise one hand to cover his eyes from the horrible glare. A firm hand clamped down on his wrist.

"You don't like this, do you?" a soft, venomous voice asked. "Men can go blind in this glare. Perhaps you'd like to tell us who you are, why you have one arm strapped to your side and why you signaled my men with a code I didn't believe anyone knew."

"Listen," Silk mumbled, "I dunno what you're talkin' about. I'm a grifter, see? Maybe my arm ain't cut off like it looks. That's my business. I don't do nobody any harm."

"Who are you?" the same soft voice insisted. "Who told you about the Black Mass? Why did you have my men assemble for an unauthorized meeting?"

"Go to the devil!" Silk rapped out, knowing it was useless to pretend any longer. "I don't talk to people I can't see."

"Ah, so. Then perhaps we shall have to use a little persuasion. No, there is no need to tremble. I do not believe in physical violence. That is used only by stupid fools who do not know any better. My methods are quieter, surer. You shall see, my snooping friend. You shall tell me everything you know because you won't be able to help yourself. Your tongue will become uncontrollable—and it will speak the truth."

There must have been some kind of a signal given for Silk was sure he heard no audible orders. But he was yanked out of the chair, a gun shoved into the small of his back and he was piloted out of the room, down a long corridor, and finally into another room that was hardly more than a cubicle. A narrow, straight-backed chair was riveted to the floor in one corner of this room.

Silk was pinned to the wall by firm hands. His lashed arm was freed and then he was forced over to the chair. He sat down. His arms and legs were quickly fastened by leather straps, closely resembling those used on an electric chair. In fact, the whole setup seemed much like that of a lethal chamber.

SILK was seized by the hair, his head held erect and another of those thick, wide bands of leather closed around his neck. He could not turn his head even a fraction of an inch.

He heard the scuffling of feet as the thugs withdrew. Then that same, satiny voice reached his ears.

"You may save yourself all this trouble, my impetuous friend, if you would like to talk. I warn you, this isn't going to be pleasant, and you shall talk anyway."

Silk gritted his teeth and said nothing. He did not know what to expect: hot searing irons, burning acid, the torture of the knives or, perhaps, a slow garrote to take him to the brink of death and then let him return once more to answer the questions of this satanic person who directed the proceedings.

But nothing like that happened. To Silk's amazement a brilliant red light streaked across the room, was manipulated until it shone into his eyes and then a silence held sway. Finally Silk was aware that the light was slowly changing from red to yellow, then to green, to blue, to a vivid orange and finally it became plain white and so dazzling that it made his senses reel.

The colors flashed on again, a little faster this time. Silk discovered that there was a fascination attached to those changing lights. As they gathered speed, their colors almost blended into one heterogeneous mass.

Silk closed his eyes tightly, but it was no use. The light shone clear through. He opened his eyes again out of sheer exhaustion from keeping them tightly closed. Then he found that he could not close them again.

His mind was spinning as fast as the lights. There was a certain numbness to his thinking powers. Silk bit his lower lip until the blood ran, for suddenly he knew what this was all about. Mechanical hypnotism! Those vivid lights would dull his senses until he would answer any questions as readily and honestly as though some superior form of truth serum was being used on him. That must not happen! But how could he prevent it? Already the soft, suave voice directed by the fiendish brain behind this scheme was beginning to ask questions, insisting on answers. In another

moment or two Silk would not be able to control those answers. He would spout the grim truth, tell who the Black Bat was—tell everything he knew!

Silk fought stubbornly against the influence of those changing lights and then decided he could not postpone the inevitable finish any longer. There was one thing he could do—bluff.

"What are you?" the soft voice kept asking monotonously. "Who sent you? Why did you trick my men? Who are you? What are you? Who sent you? Why did you trick—"

"I'm O'Brien," Silk mumbled. "O'Brien—Headquarters Mendicant Squad. Gotta keep from tellin' them. Gotta keep my head! Can't talk! What's the matter with me? I'm talking! I'm telling everything I know. I've gone crazy. I got to talk. I can't help it."

"That's right," the voice was a trifle less soft now. "Don't try to fight the colored lights. Just relax. Relax, do you hear me? Who sent you? How did you learn about the Black Mass?"

"Shannon—poor Shannon—he was knocked off. Somebody—slit his throat. Poor guy! Sent a report. Said Black Mass meant something. Detailed to try it out. Was gonna raid the spot—raid the meetin' place. I–I—"

Silk's voice rose to a shriek.

"Turn those damned lights off! I can't stand it! I can't stand it!"

A SOFTLY spoken command and the brilliant galaxy of color was turned off. Silk closed his eyes wearily and if he had not been pinned into that chair, he would have slid off it to the floor. Then he was unstrapped, half dragged, half carried into another room and flung on a cot.

When Silk opened his eyes a weird, misshapen figure was standing before him. Silk blinked very slowly, then grinned like a moronic fool. Those cursed lights—he was seeing things. No human being could look like the man he saw. That shock of wild, straw-colored hair for instance, the stooped body and the hunched shoulder. The tiny eyes that sparkled from beneath a protruding forehead.

"You see," Yancey told his men softly, "my methods are surer and better than mere violence. Machines, such as the one this officer faced, are used by psychiatrists to hypnotize their patients. Of course there is no publicity about them, for instruments of this kind can become deadly weapons in the wrong hands. I've often wondered what would happen if a man were forced to face those lights for an indefinite period—say two hours. I think he would go permanently mad. Perhaps I'll try it later this evening, when I've finished my work in the city. This officer seems like a good patient to experiment on."

"Sure, Boss," someone else agreed quickly. "We always said you was the smart one. Listen—everything is set. Cadell and Latour are taking care of the bus. At exactly ten o'clock one of them big shots is going to unveil a statue in front of the new building. That's sixty-nine minutes from now. He's going to say something over the radio, but boy is that radio audience going to get a surprise! I wonder if it'll bust their sets?"

"We shall see," Yancey chuckled. "Now roll my car out. I'm going back to see that things happen without a hitch. Guard this man well, because if he gets away, I'll need a new subject for my experiments and I might—take someone else!"

CHAPTER VII
Infernal Machine

THE Black Bat, with his cloak and hood hidden on his person, dropped off three blocks from where the dedicatory ceremonies were about to begin. He signaled Carol to drive away and vanished into the darkness of an alley. He was seething with impatience. Convincing Carol that Silk would be temporarily safe had not been so difficult, but' assuring himself of the same thing had been impossible.

Yet what could he do? Abandon several hundred persons who might need his help, to rescue one man? Even Silk? The Black Bat shook his head stubbornly. Silk was like a policeman. His life was devoted to taking the risks entailed in fighting crime. In such circumstances he would have done the same as the Black Bat was now about to do. There simply was no other solution to the problem.

The Black Bat glanced at his watch. He had more than an hour before the ceremonies would begin, but he needed that hour to make an inspection of the place, to see if he could unearth whatever fiendish trap was set for its unsuspecting victims. He forced himself not to think of Silk. Perhaps, he reasoned, as he had also assured Carol, Butch had already helped Silk gain his freedom. When Butch swung into action, things usually happened.

The Black Bat did not don his hood or cloak yet. Instead, he slipped across the intervening streets until he reached the rear of the huge building which tonight would begin a new career—that of catering to the welfare of cripples and the destitute.

Already about two hundred people were assembled in the great courtyard at the front of the institution. Two engineers were putting up radio mikes. There was a platform in the center of the court and about fifty feet directly opposite, a flag-draped statue.

The Black Bat sought a dark place in which to hide. It wasn't possible to make any inspection of the premises now for there were too many people about. Though he did trail the two radio engineers back to their truck and made certain they had not set up some death-dealing device instead of a microphone and its wiring.

He did approach the platform, risked a few moments spent on checking the supports, looking for any signs of explosive or, perhaps, poison gas. For the Black Bat held a high respect for the methods of whoever directed this grim outfit of beggars. There would be a certain polish and finesse to this final coup of the day, whatever it might turn into.

Then a band appeared, set up instruments and stands. Cars arrived and dignitaries filed onto the platform. The motley crowd of curious and others who had a personal interest in the opening of the dormitories assembled just beneath the platform.

Commissioner Warner was directing policemen to various posts before he went upon the platform himself. Tom Henning, a red-faced, mustachioed politician who played the game for all it was worth—to himself—nodded coldly to Warner. The Black Bat's eyes narrowed. Tom Henning was clever. He had showed that in his manipulation of votes. Ruthless and crooked, too, but smart. No one had ever got started in forcing him out of politics.

Jeff Garfield, shrewd criminal attorney, shook Henning's hand, spoke to Warner and then walked over to where a white-haired man of about fifty was looking at the big doors of the new dormitory. Philip Manderson, Commissioner of Welfare, looked his part. Contact with the destitute, the crippled, and the needy had given him the ability to smile warmly and lend assurance to those who sought his aid.

THE band struck up a martial air.

The crowd pressed closer and Commissioner Manderson began speaking. The Black Bat paid little attention to his words for he was watching that platform like a hawk. So far as he could figure it out now, the sole method of staging any kind of a scene lay within the crowd that listened and watched. Gunmen might shoot at close range, possibly kill whoever they were detailed to rub out.

Yet the Black Bat hardly believed that the brains behind this beggars' league would resort to anything as stupid as that. There must be something else—but what? The platform held nothing lethal or dangerous.

Then the Black Bat drew in a quick breath. Another man was climbing to the platform and his features had been emblazoned on every front page of the newspapers for years. At first, as a desperate, ruthless criminal. Then as a convict sent to pay his dues to society and, within the last three months, as a reformed, repentant man eager now to help authorities straighten out other men inclined to travel his own crooked path.

Ollie Surrett was a slender, tigerish-looking person. His shaggy blond eyebrows contrasted sharply with his unruly black hair. His eyes were dark, too, and set far apart, and his forehead was massive.

The man was all out of proportion. That head belonged on a huge body, with thick legs and arms instead of the lightweight frame that supported it. Surrett possessed mass appeal, however, because his oratory was good, but mostly because of his lurid background.

He spoke in a lusty, rugged voice, urging his listeners to obey the law, and profit by his own example. In the middle of his speech, a uniform policeman signaled Commissioner Warner. He whispered something which Warner passed on to Tom Henning, the politician. Henning nodded vigorously, got off the platform and ran toward where the officials' cars were parked. He got into his own swanky roadster and drove away at high speed.

Quietly the Black Bat donned his hood and cloak. If something was going to happen, it would come soon.

Another car turned off the street, rolled across the court and stopped close beside the platform. The Black Bat's instinctive wits flashed a message. That car had no business parking there. It had deliberately drawn so close to the platform that the fenders were almost rubbing against the supports.

Two men got out and even with the distance that intervened, the Black Bat had a glimpse of two familiar profiles. Cadell and Latour were the men who had driven that car so close.

Like a passing shadow, the Black Bat moved toward the car. He sensed what it contained and what was going to be done. But Cadell and Latour, intent on getting clear, were taking a path that led them straight into the Black Bat's hands. They were running away so madly that neither of them noticed a darker blob of shadow in the blackness of the night.

"Step on it!" Cadell called to his companion. "When that bomb lets go, we want to be plenty far away!"

Then an eerie form stepped out before them. Cadell let out a wild yell, drew a gun from a spring shoulder clip and fired. But his already raw nerves made his hand shake. There was a second shot and Cadell's howl dwindled to a low moan. He clutched at his left side. His knees gave way and he knelt for a moment before he plunged forward on his face.

LATOUR had his gun out and was trying to penetrate the darkness for a quick shot. He saw something move to his right, fired from the hip and

suddenly realized his mistake. He had been shooting at a sound—not at a human being. The Black Bat had thrown a small stone to attract Latour's attention.

Now he came upon the killer like an avenging angel of doom, his cloak widespread and giving him the eerie appearance of a huge bird in flight. He struck Latour just below the knees, brought him to the ground and wrested the gun from his hand. He rapped home a short jab, felt Latour grow limp and arose hastily.

Picking up the unconscious man, he slung him over one shoulder and headed toward the official platform. Police were closing in on the scene of the shooting and to make matters even more difficult, Sergeant McGrath was directing them. The ceremonies in front of the new dormitory came to an abrupt halt for the moment.

Encumbered by Latour's bulky weight, the Black Bat stepped into the protecting shadows offered by a construction engineer's shed about twenty yards from the platform. Two patrolmen rushed by. The Black Bat emerged quietly and begin running. He had to expose himself, had to risk being fired upon by McGrath and his men.

But there was no other way out. If Latour had not hampered him, the Black Bat could have worked faster, but he needed Latour—needed him badly.

The path to where the car was parked became clear, but the Black Bat's problems were not solved by that piece of luck. If he drove the car away, he might be blown to bits. If he didn't, then dozens of people would die. And if McGrath and his men started shooting at the car, one of their bullets might strike the explosive. The perspiration that ran down the Black Bat's face wasn't all caused by his exertions.

He ran around the scaffolding, streaked for the car and noticed one thing as he ran. There was some effort to get the ceremonies going again and quiet the crowd. Welfare Commissioner Phil Manderson was off the platform and walking briskly toward the draped statue, ready to unveil it.

The Black Bat reached the car, yanked the front door open and hurled the muttering and half awakened Latour into the front seat. Then McGrath's keen eyes saw him. McGrath shouted orders. A cordon of police wheeled back, formed a half circle and converged on the car, their guns held ready for instant action.

There was no escape to the rear, for a fence blocked any hope of backing the car away. From all other directions McGrath's men were closing in.

The Black Bat noticed the trailing wire of the amplifying system's microphone dangling from over the edge of the speaker's platform. He seized it, gave it a healthy yank and the chromium plated mike and its high stand came plummeting over the rail. The Black Bat caught it deftly and held the microphone to his lips.

"Stand clear!" he warned and the amplifying system picked up his voice, magnified it a hundred times and brought everyone to a standstill. Even Sergeant McGrath stopped.

"Stand clear!" the Black Bat repeated. "This car contains explosives and it is timed to go off at any moment! Give me a chance and I'll get it away from here! Clear a path for me!"

Sergeant McGrath believed him. There was a certain quality to the Black Bat's voice that convinced everyone of the danger. The Black Bat slid behind the wheel and reached for the light switch.

"D-don't—d-don't," Latour quavered. "Switch is wired. Get me outta here. We'll be blown to pieces."

Pushing Latour back into the seat, the Black Bat stepped on the starter and left the light switch alone. Cadell and Latour had cleverly planned it all. If the car was, by any chance, regarded suspiciously and moved, the lights would naturally be turned on and contact made with the explosives so that the full effects of that bomb would be derived anyway.

CHAPTER VIII
Death Trap

QUICKLY the car headed across the wide field, everyone giving it plenty of room. Then the Black Bat turned into the street, put his hand on the horn button and left it there. Traffic parted for that insistent blast and the Black Bat headed due east.

He made two turns and straightened out along a rather dark and deserted street. At the end of it was the river. If he could roll that car into the water, he might prevent the bomb from going off, or at least from inflicting much damage.

Latour raised his head and blinked like a man coming out of a deep sleep. Then full realization struck him. His eyes popped wide open, his jaws hung agape and a strangled cry came from his lips.

"Ten o'clock!" he screamed. "It's two minutes of! The bomb will go off! Get me out of here!"

He clawed at the Black Bat's arm. They passed by a street light and for the first time Latour saw just who his captor was. He shrank back in terror. The Black Bat clung to the wheel with one hand, jabbed his gun into Latour's ribs with the other.

"We'll both be blown to the skies unless you talk," he said calmly. "Where did you or your men take that beggar who signaled a fake meeting? Tell me, or by heaven you'll take off from the surface of

this Earth and there won't be any spinning props or strong wings to keep you aloft.

Latour was half mad with fear. The frenzy that seized him removed any desire he might have had to hedge on this question.

"He was a detective from Headquarters. They took him to Garfield's place. Garfield's—honest."

The clock on the dashboard slowly approached ten. In a matter of seconds there would be a terrific blast. The Black Bat opened the door of the car and slipped out on the running board. He still clung to the wheel with one hand and kept Latour covered with his gun in the other.

"Get out—and jump!" he ordered. "There's about one minute left. Save yourself."

But Latour's mind had cracked under the double threat of a time bomb and the presence of the Black Bat. He sensed only that this hooded man who clung to the running board was his enemy.

He made a savage dive for the Black Bat's gun hand. The element of surprise favored him and he managed to knock the weapon free. Instantly he scooped it up and with a shout of triumph raised the gun.

But the Black Bat moved fast, too. He let go of the wheel, dropped off the speeding car and let himself go limp as he hit the smooth wooden surface of the pier over which the car was now rolling. He turned over twice, was up in a flash and racing for the protection of a big stack of crated goods ready for shipment the next morning.

Latour slid behind the wheel, bared his teeth in a grimace of hatred and sent two quick shots winging after the Black Bat. Then he noticed the dashboard clock and gave a bleat of terror. He peered through the windshield, but the darkness that surrounded this long pier prevented him from seeing just where the car was headed.

He began to slide from behind the wheel and brake the car at the same time. It weaved crazily, hit something that brought the two front wheels completely off the pier. Latour found himself jammed between the wheel and the seat in such a manner that he couldn't move for a few seconds.

AHEAD of him was nothing but inky darkness. He gave a savage push to free himself and his coat pocket caught on the light switch.

Two things happened simultaneously. The front of the car dipped down, over the edge of the pier, and the headlights flashed on for a bare fraction of a second. Then there was a terrific roar and all Earthly things ceased to exist for Latour. In his eagerness to dispose of the Black Bat he had sentenced himself to death.

Half a second later a geyser shot up. The forward end of the pier was lifted as if by an invisible crane. The ground shook under the Black Bat's feet. He was dimly aware that sirens were screaming and the sound of them brought his wits back in a flash.

He ducked toward a warehouse, drawing off his cloak and hood as he raced on. These he stowed into an especially prepared pocket under his coat, then quickly donned dark glasses and his wide-brimmed hat. As a dozen radio cars closed in on the pier, the Black Bat hailed a taxi two blocks down the waterfront street.

He paid off the driver a mile from the scene, walked half a block and took a second cab. He made one more change and this time he alighted not far from his own home. His heart pounded furiously, for during his ride sirens had wailed all about him. McGrath was certainly relentless in his pursuit.

Slipping through the rear entrance to his estate, he sought the garden house and used the tunnel to reach his laboratory. Carol, plainly frightened, helped him up the ladder. As he stepped into the room, the phone buzzed.

The Black Bat drew a sharp breath and signaled for Carol to remain silent. He waited a full two minutes while the phone kept on buzzing. Then he picked up the receiver and his voice was steady, low, and not particularly cheerful as he answered. At the other end he heard only a click. He smiled a little.

"That was Sergeant McGrath doing a little checking up," he murmured. "I was afraid of that. You're sure the phone wasn't ringing before I came?"

Carol seized Tony Quinn's arms.

"No—but Tony, you don't know what's happened! The radio—there have been nothing but news flashes for the last fifteen minutes. I heard about you and—and the car loaded with explosives. That isn't all. During the ten minutes just after ten o'clock, there were five holdups and an equal number of burglaries. Some gang, formed into small groups, has raided jewelry houses, tackled an all-night bank, held up the treasurer's office of a Broadway theatre and killed a man there. It's the biggest crime wave in years. The police are running around in circles."

Tony Quinn sat down weakly, his brain reeling.

"A crime organization," he muttered. "So that's what's behind all this."

"Tony," Carol asked breathlessly, "what about Silk? Where is he?"

Tony Quinn arose quickly.

"That's my next move—running him down. One of the men who planted that car filled with explosives talked. Just enough to mention that Silk is being held at a place owned by a man named Garfield. That may mean Jeff Garfield."

"But how do you know?" Carol begged. "How can you be sure? There are a hundred Garfields in this city."

THE Black Bat looked down into her brimming eyes.

"Because I found a lot of sand and a few sea shells on the front seat of that car. Jeff Garfield owns a mansion at Edgewood Point, right on the beach. Some of the other Garfields may own shore property, too, but Jeff is mixed up in this some way. Jeff Garfield is an attorney, interested in the Welfare Department and in the Parole Board, also."

"But that won't help us find Silk," Carol insisted. "Garfield would only deny everything if he was guilty."

"I know where Garfield's place is," Tony Quinn assured her. "Been there a couple of times before I became blind."

Quinn slipped a fresh gun into his holster. He grinned at Carol, ordered her to remain just where she was, then vanished down the ladder leading into the tunnel.

He found a coupé parked not far from the limits of his estate, checked the gas and found there was plenty. Heading for the main highway, he turned north and stepped on it. There had been too much time lost. With Silk in danger, even seconds might become the difference between life and death. And with no word from Butch, the Black Bat was deeply worried. Perhaps Butch had fallen into a trap, also!

CHAPTER IX
The Sign of the Bat

WITH his hands drawn behind his back and tied, his ankles securely shackled, Silk lay on a bed in a second-story room, listening to the pounding of the surf. An hour or more had passed since that ghastly episode in front of the changing, flashing colored lights.

His nerves were back on an even keel now and he was filled with a sense of relief. Proud of himself, too—for he had neatly tricked the man called Yancey into believing he was a detective. But when Silk recalled to mind how perilously close he had been to revealing the identity of the Black Bat, he shivered.

True enough, there wasn't much hope for him now. He had tried to get free of his bonds, but they had been put on by experts. Also this shore house was teeming with men of Yancey's gang. Silk wondered how much longer he had before the fanatical leader of the mob returned. Then there would be the lights again and finally—madness. He was already steeling himself for the ordeal, commanding his brain not to reveal anything about the Black Bat.

He heard a phone ring insistently downstairs. The door to Silk's room was open and he had no difficulty in overhearing the one-sided telephone conversation.

"Yeah—yeah, I understand. The Black Bat was there, huh? Well, if he shows up here I'll cook him for breakfast... The Headquarters guy? Sure he's still here...Finish him? Okay, anything you say. We'll go right to work on it, Boss. Call you when we get back to town."

Silk went limp in resignation. He wasn't going to be saved for the light machine. Something had happened; something that involved the Black Bat. They were going to murder Silk, himself, and then run for it, like the rats they were. There was only one consolation. He would not have to face the lights again and die a million deaths trying not to reveal what he knew about the Black Bat.

Royo, the Mexican, ran up the stairs. There was a gun in his hand as he entered the room and he was scared.

"Get ready!" he said with a snarl. "We can't fool around with you, so you go on a boat ride. Way out and if you swim back, you go free, eh? Of course there will be some weights around your ankles—*si!* And your hands will be tied. Still, plainclothesmen are great guys, no? It should be easy for you."

Two other men came into the room. Silk was quickly lifted, carried down the stairs and out of the house. They dropped him on the sand for a few minutes while a trio of thugs collected a heap of junk. From it, Royo selected several heavy pieces of rusty metal. He signaled and Silk was dumped into the stern of a dory, and the chunks of metal were hastily tied to his legs so that he'd sink faster.

At the house two fast cars were being prepared for a quick getaway. Royo and a thug called Mickey got into the dory. Royo picked up the oars and suddenly he emitted a wild shriek. The others came rushing to the waterline. Royo could not talk—but he could point, and his shaking finger indicated a dark outline on the oar,

It was an image of a bat. The emblem of the Black Bat!

Royo crossed himself hurriedly, took possession of his courage again and nervously gave orders to row.

"The Black Bat has the name of a bird, *si,* but he cannot fly. He cannot reach us when we are out to sea. *Por Dios,* I do not like the game now. The Black Bat is everywhere."

Mickey grunted a string of curses and plied the oars. On shore the rest of the mob piled into the cars. One rolled off while the other remained, waiting for Royo and Mickey.

THE dory shot out to sea fast, for both crooks knew how to handle her. Silk, huddled in the stern, felt his first surge of hope. The mention of the Black Bat, the fact that he was on the scene, gave Silk new courage. Again he stealthily tried to squirm out of his bonds, but with the weights holding his feet down, it was more difficult than ever.

Royo kept muttering threats against the Black Bat, but Mickey was much more practical. He placed a gun on the seat beside him—not that he expected the Black Bat would rise right up out of the sea. The trouble would not commence until they returned to shore.

The small boat rocked dangerously once and Royo barked an order for Mickey to be more careful. Then an image from hell rose from the water like some prehistoric monster!

Royo saw it first and gave vent to a wild shriek of alarm. Mickey turned his head to the left and grabbed his gun. He managed to raise it, but had no time to press the trigger. The dory shipped half full of water and then rolled over,

Silk catapulted overside and sank like a rock. Something came darting down after him. It was the Black Bat and there was a knife gripped in his hand. A slash and the weights fell off Silk's legs. He began to rise once more.

The Black Bat swam close, slit the other bonds and when they reached the surface, Silk struck out. He was not a particularly strong swimmer, but he could keep afloat.

The Black Bat's hooded head bobbed up ten feet to his left. Royo saw it and suddenly dived.

"Look out!" Silk tried to shout, but only a squeak came from his lips.

All the punishment he had taken was beginning to tell on him. He saw the Black Bat's head go down suddenly, as if he had been seized and yanked below. Then two heads emerged. Royo was holding a knife in his hand and swimming close. The Black Bat also gripped a naked blade.

Royo made a lumbering pass with his knife, missed by a foot and then, in terror, saw the Black Bat coming toward him. Royo turned and began swimming fast. Mickey was already well on his way to shore. Mickey rather prided himself on being a smart guy. He had not the least desire to tangle with a man who could rise up out of the sea, tip over a boat and rescue a man who was tied and weighted down with iron.

The Black Bat swam over to where Silk was floundering. He passed a strong arm around Silk's middle, kept him afloat and swam toward the overturned dory. It took but a moment to get the boat right side up, then the Black Bat helped Silk to clamber aboard and hauled himself overside.

"We have no oars, but the tide will carry us in," he told Silk, panting. "Sorry I was so late."

"Th–that's all right," Silk managed. "I–I hear you—pulled a fancy one. They were going to—keep me for experiment, but they—got scared. I—"

Silk toppled forward in a dead faint. The Black Bat placed him in an easy position, then turned to watch the shore. Royo and Mickey were out of the water and running toward the waiting car. He saw them plainly in the ray of the headlights. They did not wait for the return of the Black Bat. Both had had enough. The car backed away, turned and headed for the deserted beach road.

THE tide was friendly enough. When the dory was well in to shore, the Black Bat slipped overboard, hauled Silk into the water and, supporting him above the waves, swam to shore.

A little brandy, pilfered from the house in which Silk had been prisoner, brought him around quickly. The Black Bat straddled a chair and grinned at Silk.

"You want to know how I found you, I suppose," he said. "Well, the car in which you were brought here was used in an attempt to blow up a platform loaded with city dignitaries. But when I saw my old friends Cadell and Latour get out of it, I sensed what was going to happen. Latour talked under pressure. He named Jeff Garfield. Maybe Garfield is actively mixed up in this, or it might be that these crooks knew this shore house would be vacant this time of year and would make an ideal hideout."

"Who is this guy Jeff Garfield?" Silk queried.

"An attorney," the Black Bat said softly. "He is in constant contact with criminals as a member of the Parole Board. Men like Cadell and Latour would flock to his side if he happened to have gone crooked. But I don't know. This is his house, of course. It's a piece of evidence against him—but someone might be trying to cover up by throwing the blame on Garfield. We've got to have a lot more to go on than this, Silk."

"But what's it all about?" Silk insisted on knowing. "Why would they want to blow up that platform? What's the idea of organizing all the beggars?"

The Black Bat shook his head sadly. "I can't answer those questions—not with any degree of certainty. But I have ideas on the subject. Just before I left town, there were a series of criminal acts—serious ones. So far as I can understand the setup now, the beggars are probably used as front men to line up jobs, act as lookouts and generally cover up the main activities of the real mob.

"My hunch is that the man behind it wants loot, although it's an odd way to get it. He'll have to spend months accumulating enough to split up between the beggars who belong to his organization, and the more or less physically sound crooks who work for him. There may be something more—

something bigger. But we've taken their challenge now, Silk. They know I'm mixed up in the case. Thank heaven you were disguised enough to get by. They didn't identify you, did they?"

Silk crushed out his cigarette. "They came close, sir. Uncomfortably close. Used some kind of a machine on me that threw colored lights. It nearly drove me mad. But I told them I was an undercover detective and they fell for it. Now, how do we get back to town?"

The Black Bat looked around the big room.

"You'll find the coupé parked behind a row of bath houses about five hundred feet north of here," he said. "I came a little late, Silk. They were carrying you out of the house when I first saw them. There were too many for me to tackle, so I took to the water. Now bring the car here while I have a look around this house. I might find something in the way of a clue."

"Tell me," Silk interrupted, "what does this Garfield look like?"

"He's not a bad-looking man—white-haired, distinguished. Why?"

Silk shook his head. "Then he can't be Yancey. That's the name the leader of this mob uses. He's a cripple, too—shoulder all bulged out. He's got the thickest thatch of yellow hair I've ever seen. Reminds me of a lion's mane. And he's a skinny man. Nothing distinguished about him."

The Black Bat smiled thoughtfully.

"Perhaps you're right, Silk," he said. "But your description of Yancey leads me to believe he may be disguised. We'll see later."

CHAPTER X
A Murder to Solve

JUST an hour later, Silk and Tony Quinn entered their home by way of the tunnel to find Carol and Butch impatiently awaiting them in the laboratory. Carol gave an impulsive sob of relief at the sight of Silk. But Butch had something on his mind.

"I knew you'd get Silk," he declared, nodding approvingly, "but wait until you hear what I did. After you took over tailing them guys, I went back to watch Silk. I saw him stop one beggar with that song, but the beggar didn't turn the corner like the rest of 'em did, so I figures maybe he's up to something. I followed him and he went to a rundown shanty near the dump on the East Side. A guy lets him inside, see? I watched through the window and the beggar passes this other bozo a nice juicy wad of dough."

Tony Quinn rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Odd," he muttered. "The beggar must have been assigned to carry out those orders. But why? Thank you, Butch. You have put something in the form of a clue before us. I'll see that man who was paid off."

Butch's massive chest expanded and he held up his hand to indicate he was not finished yet.

"Wait, chief, that ain't all. Not by a jugful, it ain't. I figured the same as you, and I was going to see if that guy would squawk. Maybe I'd have to use a little strong-arm stuff on him, but I didn't have to. Five minutes after the beggar scrammed, another guy shows up. A guy named Henning—one of them cheap politicians. He sneaked into the cabin like he was on the lam, and he was in a big hurry, too. He stayed there about ten minutes and when he came out, he looked like a ghost. So I waited a couple more minutes and then barged into the cabin. The guy who was paid off by the beggar was dead. Somebody had slit his throat."

Tony Quinn drew a sharp breath. "You didn't report the murder?"

"Not me," Butch answered. "I figured you'd maybe like to see what was down there, so I didn't touch a thing. Just blew outta that neighborhood and came back here."

"Good. Now, all of you listen to me. This is most important. Perhaps the murder which Butch has just described may solve this whole affair, but we can't be certain of that. There is a great deal happening undercover that we don't know about. If Butch's hunch proves a fizzle, we'll be stumped.

"All of you get some sleep. In the morning, wander around the downtown sections and listen for the notes of the Black Mass. They will be played on either a violin or a hand organ. Because Silk trumped their card once, harmonicas are out. I imagine the whole code would be changed if they had time to do it, but that is probably impossible.

"There are thousands of beggars in this city and most of them will belong to this organization. They couldn't be reached and taught a new code in time. When you hear it played, follow the beggars who answer to it. That's all—just follow them. Don't try to make any investigation on your own."

Silk and Butch nodded, and the big man vanished into the tunnel. Silk hurried through the hidden door into the house itself to prepare a light meal for Tony Quinn. Carol remained a few moments, closeted with Quinn in the laboratory.

"What's behind it all, Tony?" she asked. "Have you any ideas?"

Quinn shook his head slowly. "Nothing worth much. The organization of the beggars must be a coverup for something. This man who calls himself Yancey, and heads the league, isn't the type to worry about the welfare of beggars. He's after something for himself. When he gets it, he will

vanish—as Yancey anyway. I'm sure he is disguised. Now run along and get some rest. Don't worry about me. My next move is quite harmless. I'm going to call on a dead man."

BUT Carol was not satisfied.

"Please be careful," she pleaded. "I—I wouldn't want to have given you back your sight only to have your life forfeit."

Quinn took her slender hand between his strong ones and smiled down at her.

"You forget, Carol, the provisions by which your father willed me his eyes," he murmured. "I was to fight crime—fight it with its own ruthless weapons if need be."

She closed her eyes slowly and nodded.

"Yes, Tony, of course. But I can't help worrying. When you were driving that car loaded with explosives, I heard all about it over the radio. I think I aged ten years during those few minutes. You've been lucky, that's all."

Tony Quinn led her over to the trapdoor above the tunnel.

"Lucky?" he repeated softly. "Perhaps, Carol, but you see we're on the right side of things. There must be some sort of a guiding angel aligned with us. In fact, I'm sure of it—there are two angels. One I can't see, but the other—is you. Now run along before I start making love to you and forget there's a murder case for me to solve."

Tony Quinn donned a smoking jacket, picked up his cane, and that blank, staring look came over his eyes. He entered the living room, tapped his way over to his accustomed chair in front of the fireplace and sat there while Silk arranged a small table.

"Silk"—Tony Quinn downed his cup of coffee—"keep an eye on Carol, will you? This league of beggars would murder her faster than I can say it if they ever caught her working against them. I can't stop her anymore than I can prevent dawn from breaking. Which reminds me, I haven't much time. The Black Bat must be in his cave by daylight. Keep an eye open for Sergeant McGrath, too. He may be prowling...."

With his hood and cape in place, the Black Bat parked his car near the area which Butch had described. Finding the hovel in which murder had been committed was the work of only a minute. The Black Bat drew his gun, slowly pulled the safety off and stepped into the cabin. It was a dirty, rundown place made all the more eerie by the stiffening form that lay across the bed.

The man was dead all right. The murderer had made certain of that. Calmly the Black Bat searched the dead man. If he had been given any money, as Butch indicated, it had either been stolen or the victim had hidden it around the premises, but a detailed search of the small cabin failed to reveal any trace of the money.

Then the Black Bat suddenly faded into the darkness of a small room adjacent to the one in which the dead man lay. Someone was approaching the cabin, someone who trod heavily on the rough dirt path leading to the door.

A short, pudgy man entered, holding a gun in one hand and a flashlight in the other. Carefully closing the door behind him, he snapped on the flash and sent the finger of light directly toward the bed.

He started in horror and amazement at what he saw. With a muttered exclamation he stepped over to the dead man, bent close to the body and studied the face. He straightened up, hurriedly mopped his face with a handkerchief and headed for the door.

"It would be much healthier if you dropped that gun, doused the flashlight and remained very quiet," a soft voice came from the darkness. "I've got you covered."

THE intruder let the gun and light slip from his hands and raised his arms high.

"Don't shoot!" he begged in a voice slightly cracked with apprehension. "I'm no crook. I came here to see Monty Bruce. He's a pal of mine. What did you kill him for?"

"I didn't kill him," the Black Bat answered. "But perhaps you know who did. Turn around."

The intruder believed himself to be masked by darkness. To bolt for the door would prove fatal for he would be outlined against it as he stepped through. There was no chance of getting away, but there was a good opportunity of hiding something that might prove incriminating.

Almost faster than the eye could follow, his right hand darted beneath his coat, removed a letter from the inner pocket and thrust it into a cooking pan that rested on a shelf two feet from where he felt a gun drill into his back. Capable, strong hands searched him and found a leather case.

"So," the man in the darkness said, "you're a private detective named Bride. What brought you here?"

"I—I'm working for an insurance company," the man stammered. "This dead guy was an ex-con. You can prove that easy. I figured him as having some insured stuff hidden and I wanted to make him an offer."

"You didn't send him any money?" the Black Bat asked.

"Who—me?" Bride asked in a surprised voice. "Say, I wouldn't give that rat a plugged nickel unless he handed over what I wanted first. What do you say if we turn on the lights and have a little talk, eh? Just you and me."

"We're doing quite all right now," the Black Bat answered with a chuckle. "I've already given you my calling card. You'll find it after you leave here. Now listen carefully, Bride. I happen to know about you. You don't work for any insurance company because you're too crooked for them to retain. Your specialty is odorous divorce cases and you're out of your element here. This is murder. I'll give you an opportunity to think things over before I call on you again. Next time don't lie. Now get out of here."

Bride ran to the door, slammed it behind him and raced over to where he had parked his car. Before he got in, he carefully searched his pockets.

"Calling card my eye," he grumbled. "That guy bumped Monty Bruce and was kidding me. As if he'd give me any identification."

Bride opened the car door, slid behind the wheel and turned on the lights. He glanced in the rearview mirror and stiffened. He snapped the dome light on and gave a long gasp of horror.

Pasted in the center of his forehead was the emblem of the Black Bat!

In the murder cabin the Black Bat swung into action immediately. He had observed Bride's swift motions in concealing the letter, for of course darkness was no barrier to the eyes of The Bat. He found the envelope and his black gloved hands extracted a letter and opened it. His eyes, behind the mask, glittered and narrowed as he read:

> Dear Mr. Bride:
>
> In accordance with my offer I am enclosing a check for one thousand dollars as a retainer. You will proceed to carry out my instructions at once. Thomas Henning is to be watched. Every move he makes must be reported to me at least once a day, and always by letter sent through a messenger. Your expenses are guaranteed and upon completion of this assignment another check for a similar sum will be dispatched.
>
> Jeff Garfield

"Garfield again," the Black Bat muttered. "Why does he want Henning watched and why did he hire a shady detective like Bride to do the work? What is Garfield's interest in all this?"

THERE was no answer to that question yet. The Black Bat carefully replaced the letter. Bride would undoubtedly call for it just as soon as he dared. If the letter were missing, Bride would instantly report the facts to Garfield and put him on guard. It was better if neither Bride nor his employer realized that the Black Bat had found the letter.

On his way back home the Black Bat tried to puzzle out just what connection this murdered ex-convict might have to the beggar league. There was no question but that they were behind the killing, for Butch had trailed one of their number to the cabin. Then Tom Henning had appeared and Bride must have trailed Henning.

Bride's motive for invading the cabin later was clear cut. He had wanted to force the dead man to reveal why Henning had paid him this nocturnal visit and had even gone so far as to leave the dedicatory ceremonies to keep the date.

The Black Bat uttered an exclamation. Perhaps Henning had known of the impending explosion! It was logical to reason that he would have left the scene in a rush to avoid being blown to bits by the bomb.

There was a good chance that Henning had known of it and fled! What other reason could have impelled such haste as he had displayed?

CHAPTER XI
Sealed Orders

EARLY the next afternoon, Tony Quinn awoke from a restful sleep. He was alone in the great house for Silk had left right after dawn to prowl the streets. There was a cold lunch ready. Silk rarely forgot to provide for his employer.

Quinn ate with a relish and then spent two hours scanning back copies of all the newspapers for two months. He checked every detail concerning the decision to abolish beggars. He noted the full page ads, donated by the newspapers, in a drive to garner fifteen million dollars.

It was mostly to be used in caring for these cripples and homeless men and women. New dormitories were planned, courses in rehabilitation were to be established. Everything calculated to put these cripples and beggars on a self-sustaining basis was being done, to make them able to provide for themselves through honest, useful work.

It was a gigantic venture inspired by Welfare Commissioner Phil Manderson. Later issues of the same papers indicated that the public response had been surprisingly good. Already a few projects had been started, like the conversion of the old armory into a dormitory for the cripples. Police reports indicated that the beggars also were responding. Their number had dwindled to a minimum, and without the need to imprison a few hundred of their number.

In this morning's paper the Black Bat read a new angle on the case. Since the beggars had resorted to violence and robbery, the fund had stopped growing. Commissioner Manderson had issued a public appeal, urging that the donations keep on, declaring that the goal was still five million dollars short and indicating that as soon as the money could be

placed into circulation, the beggars were bound to stop their wave of crime. A meeting of Manderson, Police Commissioner Warner and other members of the commission was to be held at Manderson's home tonight.

Tony Quinn's sightless eyes did not flicker nor did his scarred face undergo any change while his brain clicked smoothly.

"I wonder," he thought, "if that meeting would appreciate a visitor? Manderson and his friends may know more than the newspapers reveal. They might, properly persuaded, tell everything to the Black Bat."

Tony Quinn spent an hour wandering around his estate. He made this a part of his daily program, for even blind men must have air and sunlight. Passersby and neighbors had grown accustomed to seeing Quinn make his way slowly along the winding paths of his estate, It wouldn't do to let them begin wondering if he didn't appear.

Above all else, there must be no connection between blind Tony Quinn and the outlaw of the night known as the Black Bat. Such suspicions would not only cause the underworld to check closely, but it would also bring Detective Sergeant McGrath's suspicions to a head. Between the two, the Black Bat's career would be abruptly ended—by a bullet perhaps, or a cell with McGrath telling the world how right he had been all along.

Tony Quinn had a well-developed idea that the guiding genius behind all this crime wouldn't remain content to bask in the success of his first venture. There would be other crimes until they reached a point where the public would be ready to dicker. Unless Yancey, as the leader called himself, could keep on proving his worth to the League of Beggars, it would soon crumple under it own weight. To keep several thousand men content meant action—and plenty of it.

WELL after dark, a figure dressed in black, with a turned-down hat brim to conceal his scarred features, slipped out of Tony Quinn's estate, made his way to where Butch had parked the coupé. A moment later he was driving it away.

The radio, hidden under the dash, was tuned to the police broadcast wavelength. The Black Bat turned it on. He had no particular destination in mind. Like Silk, Butch and Carol, he was looking for signs of the beggar league's activities and listening for the mournful notes of the Black Mass.

He kept mostly to the back streets, not daring to risk exposing himself in the better lighted thoroughfares. Every moment that Tony Quinn was abroad, garbed in his black clothing and driving a car, spelled danger. Most of the thousands of policemen knew him well. If he were recognized, the whole game would be up.

The Black Bat touched the brake pedal, slowed up and regarded three men posted in front of a huge warehouse. They seemed to be intently discussing something and any ordinary man would not have given them a second glance.

But the Black Bat noticed that one man carried a cane, wore dark glasses and moved with the uncertainty of the blind. Another had only one arm, and the third was a one-legged, disreputably dressed ruffian. As the Black Bat watched, they parted and each took up a post about fifty feet apart.

A sign above the main entrance to the warehouse indicated that it belonged to the Pacific Silk Corporation. The Black Bat whistled softly. It looked like preparations for a stick-up. He glanced at his watch, saw that it was three minutes of nine and drove quickly around the next corner. It was probable that nine o'clock was the zero hour.

Suddenly the car radio whined softly. The announcer's voice was clipped and tense with excitement.

"All midtown cars!" he called. "Explosion at Welfare Commission's East Side garage. Proceed there at once. All midtown cars answer the alarm."

The Bat sent his coupé racing down the street, stopped it in a dark section of the neighborhood and got out. He scaled a fence, found himself in the supply yard of a salvage company and hurdled piles of rope, casks and pulleys.

Reaching the rear of the silk company's warehouse, he paused long enough to don his hood and robe, then rushed on into the night. He heard a smothered scream and as he came within sight of the loading platform, he saw a dozen men attacking the big doors. A watchman lay, half dangling off the edge of the platform, and blood dripped slowly from a deep scalp wound.

In front of the warehouse the beggar interference while the other members of the league—the stalwarts and the detail would be watching for signs of healthy—would raid the warehouse, plunder it of thousands of dollars in priceless silks. Any who tried to stop them would meet quick death—just as that watchman had.

The Black Bat whipped out a gun. Two trucks were rolling through the spacious yard and getting set to back up to the platform. The doors were opened with keys taken from the watchman. The men piled in. Before two minutes had elapsed, they were busily engaged in carrying out the flat, heavy bolts of silk.

Grimly the Black Bat moved toward the loading platform. To attack all these men would be both foolish and vain. They were primed to kill and their own numbers would give them confidence to fight even the Black Bat.

INSTEAD of plunging into a hopeless fight, the Black Bat slipped around the corner of the warehouse, sought the office on the first floor and calmly pushed in a pane of glass near the window catch. He made little noise and attracted no attention. If the building was wired against invasion, the signal system had been rendered impotent by the robbers. He slid the catch back, raised the window and hoisted himself up and through it agilely.

Inside he paused long enough to get his bearings. Then he crept out into the vast space of the warehouse. Two men were attacking a pile of silks about a dozen yards away. The Black Bat moved toward them, inverted his gun and sprang forward lightly. His gun butt cracked against one man's skull and dropped him. The other man, impeded by an armful of silk, started to yell a warning.

The Black Bat's hand clasped across his mouth, jerked the crook's head back and he rapped him hard with the butt of his gun. Then he carefully picked up the unconscious men, carried them into the office and ripped open one of the bolts of silk. He tore some of it into strips and carefully bound his prisoners. An efficient gag prevented them from giving any alarm if they recovered consciousness before he was finished.

Two more men were dispatched in a similar manner, for the Black Bat's plan was to capture as many of the robbers as possible. One of their number might talk, might possibly give some hint to the extent of this bizarre organization—or a clue that would lead to its yellow-maned leader.

A towering, husky man with a gun in his fist came barging down the middle of the warehouse floor.

"Joe—Morelli—where are you?" he yelled. "Drag some of that silk to the trucks. Answer me, you dopes!"

A shadowy figure flitted before the gaze of the startled crook. Two strong arms encircled him, pinning his gun hand to his side.

"Let me answer for them," the Black Bat whispered. "They're both asleep—just as you're going to be."

He brought down his gun once more, but this time his victim did not slump to the floor. Instead he rolled with the blow and squeezed the trigger of the gun he held. Its roar reverberated through the vast warehouse, sending a shower of dust drifting down from the high rafters.

A hoarse command, and more than six of the invaders headed in the Black Bat's direction. He gave his prisoner a quick shove, moved in before he could raise the gun and delivered a well-aimed blow to the chin. As the crook went down with a crash, the Black Bat whirled to face his oncoming enemies.

His gun blazed twice. One of the crooks yelped and staggered aside, gripping his shoulder. But the others came on. Their guns spat death now. The Bat leaped behind a huge stack of baled silk. The bullets plopped into the material.

"Spread out!" one of the crooks shouted. "Get that guy! Must be a watchman we didn't figure on. Burn him down!"

They obeyed, and the Black Bat's predicament became grave. He could not possibly shoot it out with all these men. While he centered his attentions on one or two of them, the others could swing behind him. They were primed to kill and wouldn't hesitate now.

SOME of them were close to the high tower of silk. The Black Bat thrust his arms between several bolts, shoved hard and the pile toppled over. The crooks in front of it tried to escape the downpour of heavy bolts, but they acted too late. They were not injured by the falling silk, but were knocked down. One of those at the rear saw a form rise up out of the darkness, sail over what was left of the tower of silk, vaulting the fallen bolts easily.

"He's heading for the door!" this crook shouted the alarm. "Stop him!"

One man tried. He saw the advancing form, raised a gun and then made out the eerie appearance of the onrushing man.

"The Black Bat!" he shrieked in terror. "It's the Black Bat!"

His hand shook badly as he fired and the bullet went wild. Then the Black Bat was upon him. He tripped the man, left him floundering around, and darted for the open doors.

There was a hastily conceived plan in the Black Bat's mind—a daring one that might well end his career, but this was a time for daring.

The drivers of the trucks backed to the loading platform were already warming up their motors. One of the trucks was almost full of silk and the other about half full.

A member of the robber gang who had been assigned to loading the silk, spotting the Black Bat as he raced across the platform, drew a gun, fired once and missed. He swung around, looking for a sign of the black-clad intruder.

But there was none. The Black Bat had vanished completely.

Somewhere on the street a police whistle shrilled. The man on the platform gave a warning signal. The others came racing out of the warehouse, piled into the front seats of the trucks and rolled away. Mingled with the noises at the front of the warehouse came the eerie sound of the low, bleak notes of the Black Mass. The beggars were giving a belated signal.

The two trucks rumbled out of the alley and three patrolmen ran up. They shouted for the drivers to stop, but the answer came in hot lead as the crooks began shooting briskly. The patrolmen sought cover and returned the fire.

They blew blasts on their whistles and pounded the sidewalk with their nightsticks, but no help came, for all radio cars were converged on the scene of the latest explosion, and the trucks had free sailing after they turned the next corner.

One of the patrolmen commandeered a passing car, climbed on the running board and urged the driver to open her up. As the sedan raced toward the last of the two trucks, the patrolman opened fire. Two seconds later he was rolling in the gutter, riddled with bullets, and the commandeered car had mounted the sidewalk to smash into the side of a building.

Mexican Royo squeezed between his pals on the wide seat of the truck, wiped his face with his sleeve and groaned.

"That Black Bat, he is a dangerous one," he complained. "He is everywhere, knows everything. And this time he got away again. But we have the silk, *si.* Plenty of it even if he caused us to miss two complete truckloads. If the others have made out as well, there can be no criticism from Yancey."

"They'll make out," grunted the driver, hunched over the wheel, with his foot heavy against the floor board.

"This way it can't help but click, see? Not a radio car to chase us. What saps those bluecoats are."

ROYO shivered for some reason he could not quite figure out himself.

"Si, si, they are not clever, as you say, but the Black Bat—to me it seems that he even out-thinks Yancey, and that I do not like. I almost feel as though he was flying above us, waiting for a chance to drop."

The driver made a wry face. "You're cracking up, Mex. The Black Bat ain't no more than any human being, is he? Sure he got five of us—good men, too—but they don't know anymore about this racket than we do. The police can third-degree 'em for a year and they won't talk, because they can't. What about them sealed orders, Mex? Time we was hunting cover."

Royo took a sealed envelope from his pocket, ripped open the flap and read the brief message inside. It ordered:

> To the old airport. The stuff is to be dropped at the hangar and then the trucks are to be taken more than twenty miles away, set afire and abandoned.

The driver nodded.

"It's a swell place, all right," be agreed. "Nobody ever comes to that airport since it was left there to rot. I wonder if Yancey has a plane in the hangar. I'd like to see the Black Bat catch one of those babies after they leave the ground."

CHAPTER XII
Double Trap

BUTCH unwound his big frame from a fire hydrant at dusk that evening and lumbered up the street. He did not like assignments of this kind. There was not any action. Yet the Black Bat had emphasized the importance of Butch's task and he would stick to it.

Stopping in a tavern, Butch consumed two glasses of beer in two swallows and then ambled out again. As he hit the sidewalk, he paused. From around the corner came the wailing notes of the code song. Butch pulled his hat firmly down, stuck his hands into his pockets and sauntered around the corner.

A hand organ player, with dark glasses and a card indicating that he was blind, turned out the tune from the creaky organ. Butch parked himself in front of a store window and in the reflection saw the beggars drawn to that song like moths to a flame. They shuffled close to the blind man, heard their orders and were off.

Butch selected a peg-legged beggar to trail. He could not lose him. But Butch might have been more than astonished if he had looked behind him. From two other doorways, two men sauntered forth. They passed the hand organ player and dropped a coin into his tin cup. Then they followed Butch. The trailer was being trailed.

The hand organ player turned out the rest of the songs swiftly, picked up his organ and hurried along the street until he reached a drugstore. He went inside, parked the organ near the door and asked to be led to a phone booth. There he dialed a number by sense of touch.

"I have a message to deliver—dropped into my cup attached to a coin," he said when he got his call. "Two of the men have picked up a shadow who is following a peg-legged beggar. Be ready to close the trap."

There was a click at the other end of the connection. The blind man adjusted his glasses and emerged into the drugstore, smirking his thanks vacantly.

Butch walked slowly, for the man he followed could not move fast. He seemed to be heading due west—to some new meeting place, Butch reasoned. It would be something of a feather in his cap if he could obtain information about the gang's next move. Even Silk, or Carol, hadn't accomplished that.

Automatically his hand sought his vest pocket and he glanced at a slip of paper. It was a note from Carol, sent by a bootblack. She wanted to see Butch at the entrance to the Miller Building at eight-thirty. Butch wondered if he would have time to keep the appointment now.

The peg-legged man hobbled along sedately for several more blocks, then suddenly stopped. Butch faded into the shadows of a high tree. The beggar looked around carefully, was apparently satisfied that he was not being followed, and turned into the darkened, open doorway of a big garage building.

Butch gave him two or three minutes start and then stepped into the building, also. He heard a whirring sound at the far end of the spacious cement-floored garage. It was an elevator, going up. There was no sign of the peg-legged man and Butch reasoned that he must be using the elevator to reach one of the top floors where the meeting was to take place.

Butch walked softly in the direction of the elevator. It had stopped before he reached the steel door that was automatically raised on pulleys when the lift was at the floor level. Pressing the button, Butch heard the mechanism whir and the elevator started down.

HE had stepped onto the platform and was starting to turn around and look for the controls when a gun was jammed painfully against his ribs.

"Lift 'em!" a harsh voice snarled. "High!"

Butch raised his arms and slowly turned around. Two leering men faced him with guns drawn.

"You're going up, sucker," one of them laughed. "But you ain't coming down again—with a whole skin—because we're going to ventilate you a little. One move and you get it right now."

The lift began rising. Butch tensed. Here on the elevator platform he was faced by only two enemies. Above, there was no telling how many would be waiting for him. If he intended to make break for it, his only chance lay in swift action.

One big hand came down in a mighty sweep. It caught the nearest man off guard and Butch's mighty fingers pulled the gunman's hat down over his eyes. The other killer hesitated. He did not want to shoot for the weapon's roar was bound to attract attention. Butch had called their bluff.

He grinned slightly, grabbed the killer's gun hand and with one twist brought a howl of anguish from the gunman. The weapon dropped to the floor. Butch drew back his fist, poised it a moment and let go. The gunman's head was almost torn off his shoulders. The second man he had gone after first was trying to pull his hat up from over his eyes. Butch did it for him and then closed one eye with a short jab. He seized the fellow by the throat, lifted him off his feet and shook him.

THEN he realized that the elevator stopped. The steel safety door on this upper floor was rising. Butch made a vain attempt to reach the controls and send the lift down again, but he was too late.

A horde of clawing, cursing beggars swarmed onto the lift. Crutches and canes whacked against Butch's head and face. He covered up, emitted a wild roar and charged through the throng. But more were hemming him in on all sides as he emerged from the elevator. He swung his arms fiercely and then drew back.

One big arm had swept two men off their feet and hurled them to the floor. One of these had no arms, the other was apparently blind. Filled with horror, Butch waited a second too long. Five sound-limbed, narrow-eyed men were charging toward him. The beggars closed in tighter than ever.

"I can't slug guys like you!" Butch howled. "It ain't fightin' fair. But I'm comin' through, so look out!"

He lowered his head, butted half a dozen men out of the way and ran straight into the arms of Yancey's thugs. Butch was shoved back against a wall. A gun was thrust against his Adam's apple and two of the killers seized his arms,

"So, you wouldn't fight cripples, huh?" one of the men leered. "For a big guy you sure got a soft heart. But we ain't. Your number is up, Tarzan. You been searched, so don't reach for that roscoe you had in your pocket. Just walk nice and quiet toward that back room. And remember—we got four guns ready to plow you under."

Butch sighed deeply and then obeyed. He cursed himself for being such a fool as to be trapped like this. Yet he knew that it was not in him to batter already helpless men out of his path. These crooks were different. If Butch found a chance, he would cheerfully crack their heads wide open, but cripples! Butch made a wry face.

They were all about him, these clawing beggars, pulling at his coat, prodding him painfully with canes and crutches. Then the door of the indicated room opened and Butch stepped inside to face two more armed men.

One of them indicated a chair.

"Sit down, Tarzan. Are you an undercover man from Headquarters or are you tied up with the Black Bat?"

Butch pursed his lips and snorted a defiant answer. "How'd you pipsqueaks like to put your gats down and try to find out?"

One of the thugs began sorting the articles he had taken from Butch's pockets. Carol's note intrigued him. He handed it to a lean, hawk-faced man.

"Looks like our pal had a date. It's signed by a dame named Carol, but maybe that's the Bat—or some stoolie from Headquarters. We oughta find out."

"We will," the hawk-faced man snapped. He faced Butch. "Listen, you—we're ready to blow your backbone into your stomach, get me? Now you're going for a little ride to keep this date. We want to pick up your pal. Play nice and you won't get hurt."

Butch was seized again, led out of the room and through the crowd of jeering beggars. A car was parked near the ramp leading to the floors below. Butch got into the front seat beside the driver and discovered that he would ride with a gun pressed against the nape of his neck.

There was not a chance for him to escape now. He groaned and shivered. He was being used as bait—human bait to lure Carol to a doom as unescapable as his own. But if he sacrificed his life to save hers, what good would that do?

These men were clever enough to take his place, question any other person who lolled around the lobby of that office building and probably trick Carol into accompanying them.

Butch's brain worked ponderously slow at times, but he did reason out the fruitless effects of self-sacrifice. It was better to see the thing through, but never in his life had Butch missed the Black Bat more than he did right now.

The car pulled up before the entrance of the building and Butch held his breath for fear that Carol might already be there. If he could only warn her in time! Do anything but permit this trap to close around her, too!

"Walk into the lobby, Tarzan," one of the thugs ordered. "Park against the wall so you can be seen from the doorway. We'll be offside and ready to give it to you if there's a phony play. Come on—step on it."

Butch got out of the car, entered the lobby and glanced up at the huge clock. Carol was due in two minutes. Then he saw her. She was crossing the street briskly, heading straight toward the mouth of the trap.

Butch wanted to call out, to warn her to run. But even that was too late now. One of the thugs was following close behind Carol as she entered the lobby.

An elevator dropped to the main floor and discharged two passengers. They eyed the tableau curiously, but went on. Carol walked straight up to Butch and to his utter surprise put both her arms around him.

"I didn't think you'd make it," she said clearly. Then her voice dropped to a whisper. "Is there a chance? I saw them make you get out of the car."

BUTCH shook his head dumbly. The three killers were already closing in. Carol's lips brushed the lobe of his ear.

"I just put a gun in your pocket," he heard her faint whisper. "Don't use it until I give the word."

One of the men seized Carol's arm and yanked the purse from her hand. Another moved his pocketed hand suggestively. The purse was opened and then handed back to Carol.

"Listen, sister," one of the men warned. "A peep outta you and your boyfriend will get drilled with lead bullets, understand? You're going for a little ride and if you don't squawk, nobody will get hurt. Now get going."

They marched toward the car and the weight of Carol's small automatic rested comfortably in Butch's pocket. At least he had one ace in the hole, even if the chance to use it was discouragingly slender.

They climbed into the car and to Butch's surprise it headed in the opposite direction from where the garage was located. They were pointed straight for the outskirts.

No one spoke during the half hour ride. Then the headlights of the car swept over a battered gate just off the highway. There was some kind of a huge barnlike structure shrouded in the darkness.

A man appeared out of the gloom, hastily opened the rickety gate and the driver of the car doused his lights as he turned off the road to pass through the gate. The car rolled up before the big structure and Butch saw that it was really a hangar, rather dilapidated looking.

The doors opened and the driver steered the car inside. Then the doors slid closed again and an overhead light was turned on. Carol gasped in sheer amazement. At the far end of the structure was a cabin plane.

Besides that, two big trucks were parked inside and men were busily engaged in hauling out bolts of silk. Along the walls were piled other bales of stolen goods. Two men with machine guns across their laps sat near the wide doors.

"Get out, you two," one of their captors barked. All the thugs held exposed guns steady now, for there was no longer any need to conceal them. Carol and Butch were marched up to where a swarthy-faced man stood waiting for them.

"Mex," one of the men reported, "this big guy tailed one of the beggars and we grabbed him. We found he had a date to meet this dame so we picked her up too. What'll we do with 'em?" Mex Royo scowled.

"But one thing, *si.* Take them with us—and quickly. We must get away from this place. The Black Bat has taken a hand against us. We lost five men to him and he disappeared. There is no telling where he is at this moment."

"And the stuff?" Royo was asked.

"Jewels and money are in the plane. The rest of it stays right here. It will be safe enough. The plane

is ready to be rolled onto the field for a takeoff. Put these two inside and watch them. I will have a little talk when we have finished here. If they answer my questions, they live. If not they go out the door—with no parachute."

"Aw listen, Mex," one of the men protested shrilly, "you got the jim-jams over this Black Bat. What if he did nail some of the boys? He ain't here, is he? If the police can't find this place, neither can the Black Bat."

ROYO was not particularly impressed. He motioned Carol and Butch away, turned to issue orders that the unloading of the trucks should progress faster, and then everyone in the hangar received a shock. From inside one of the trucks came a man's body, hurtling out to land against the wall. He lay there in a limp heap. Royo raced over to him, raised the man's head and emitted a yelp of terror.

The signature of the Black Bat was emblazoned in the center of the man's forehead!

Royo straightened up, opened his mouth to yell orders. A single shot sounded and the one overhead light winked out, showering glass down on the men assembled below it.

In the intense darkness Royo could not see the form that emerged from the truck. It was the Black Bat, his ribbed cape flowing like the wings of some mighty bird.

CHAPTER XIII
Battle in Darkness

ROYO, with his Latin American temperament and superstitions, was temporarily stunned and out of any action, but his mates moved forward to attack. Carol yanked free of a restrained hand, darted toward the doors but was stopped by two men who flung her roughly against the side of one truck. Butch was stopped before he could even begin to fight. One of the thugs remained close to his side, gun drilling into Butch's ribs.

Near the rear of the trucks a miniature war was raging. The Black Bat, crouched in a dark corner, fired twice and brought down one man. As he pressed the trigger, he leaped aside so that the bullets answering his own would not find their target.

One intrepid crook clambered on the roof of a truck, peered down and caught a vague glimpse of a moving figure. He leveled his gun, but died before he could squeeze the trigger. The Black Bat's keen eyes had penetrated the darkness and recognized his peril in time.

Then Royo sprang into action. Once the unholy terror of the Black Bat's presence left him, he was able to think fast. The girl! Without question the Black Bat had arrived to rescue her. She and that man mountain must be aides. Royo sprang toward Carol, enveloped her in a strangling embrace and shielded his own body with hers.

"Bat!" he yelled. "The girl—she will be killed in one moment unless you stop shooting. You cannot see us, but I have her and my knife sticks into her throat. Surrender or she dies!"

The Black Bat's finger grew limp against the trigger of his automatic. He could see Carol, could distinguish with cruel clarity just how endangered she was. Royo did have a knife at her throat and he was frightened enough to use it. To make a target of Royo was dangerous for the Mexican's body was well behind Carol's. The slightest miss and Carol would take the bullet.

The Black Bat's eyes flickered from left to right, centered on Butch and saw that he was also a prisoner. But here was a slim chance. Butch was not being used as a shield. The Black Bat's gun swung sideward, centered on the thug who held Butch at pistol point.

But the Black Bat hesitated. One shot might impel Royo to sink that deadly blade into Carol's throat. It was too much of a risk. If need be, the Black Bat was willing to give up his life if Carol could be saved, although he realized bitterly that even if he did surrender, these men would murder her anyway.

Suddenly the Black Bat grasped his gun around the barrel and hurled it straight at the crook who kept Butch a prisoner. The weapon hurtled through the darkness and connected with the thug's temple. He reeled back a step and Butch swung around. One blow was sufficient. The thug's jaw crushed under the terrific impact.

Hearing sounds of conflict in another direction, Royo almost lost his head. The point of his blade already drew a tiny trickle of blood from Carol's throat. Royo was trembling, a bundle of raw nerves. He was afraid of nothing that he could see or face, but the Black Bat was an inhuman monster who could be in two or more places at the same time.

Butch moved forward like a two-legged battering ram. Hampered by the inky darkness, he could not gauge directions, but every time he saw a human form loom up, he reached out, gripped the man by the throat and brought him close until he was certain it was not the Black Bat who squirmed in his grip. Then he drove a mighty punch to the face, dropped the man like a bundle of burlap bags and pressed on, searching for more victims in the blackness.

ROYO was giving orders and the sound of his voice became a magnet for Butch. He took out the small, snub-nosed pistol that Carol had slipped into

his pocket, pulled back the hammer with a thumb almost as big as the weapon itself, and moved toward Royo.

"Black Bat!" Royo rasped. "This is your last chance. She dies unless you move into the center of the hangar. Start—now!"

The Black Bat's throat was dry. If he moved, the killers would hear him and start shooting. Some of their bullets were bound to strike home. He could see Royo's men, tense and waiting, guns held ready.

But he could also see that Royo was priming himself to drive the blade into Carol's throat. The Black Bat straightened up, threw his hooded head back and prepared to move forward. The moment the shooting started and there was confusion enough to cover up his movements, he planned to begin an attack on Royo—unless hot lead stopped him.

Royo's left arm, encircling Carol's throat and blocking any attempt on her part to scream, s uddenly grew limp. For a second, Royo could not figure out what had happened. Then he realized that something like a mighty vise had closed around his shoulder, rendering the whole arm dead. He gave a squeal of alarm, tried to use the knife, but a hand descended on his wrist, pulled it and the knife it held away from Carol's throat and then turned the wrist until it snapped.

"Got him, Boss!" Butch shouted.

"I'm all right," Carol added in a strained voice.

The Black Bat veered to the left suddenly. One man was standing beside the tailboard of the nearest truck. A machine gun cradled in his arms was ready to be hoisted into firing position the moment he saw something to shoot at.

The Black Bat struck the man below the knees, brought him down and straddled him. Seizing his victim by the throat, he raised the crook's head and let it bang back against the cement floor. Then he picked up the machine gun and made a dive toward the cab of one truck. A man was climbing aboard, intent on turning on the headlights. The Black Bat raked him across the head with his gun barrel, dragged him back down and whirled to meet an attack by two other men who were close enough to realize that their enemy was almost within reach.

A gun went off almost in the Black Bat's face and the powder sprayed his hooded cheek. Instead of sweeping the area with gunfire from the rapid-fire rifle, however, the Black Bat again reversed the weapon and used it as a club.

One of the two gunmen went down with a groan and the other scampered back to a spot of safety. He backed straight into Butch and a split second later lost all interest in things.

Then, suddenly, one of the thugs got the wide, sliding door open a crack and wormed his way through. Others followed eagerly.

"Butch," the Black Bat called softly, "they are all out of here! Close that big door. I'm going to turn on the truck headlights. Look out for anyone who might be hiding in here."

The doors slid shut and the powerful headlights from the two trucks gave plenty of light to bring every detail of the hangar into bold relief. Two men were trying to get up. Royo lay on his back groaning and calling upon all the devils in hell to descend on the Black Bat. Butch moved around, herding the living men into one group. On the floor one man was dead, and four others were unconscious.

ALL of the prisoners were searched and those who might be able to get away under their own steam were tied up. All except Royo. The Black Bat stood before him and the Mexican cowered back, sheer terror shining in his wide eyes.

"The truth," the Black Bat said quietly. "If you know who this man Yancey really is—talk."

"But I do not!" Royo groaned. "*Por Dio!* I swear it! What he looks like I can tell you, *si.* A hunchback he is, with a great shock of yellow hair and little eyes."

"How do you contact him?" the Black Bat demanded. "There must be some way."

"Always it is by telephone and a different number," Royo chattered. "We can phone him only at certain times, *senor.* That is the truth."

The Black Bat's gun drilled into Royo's ribs.

"Walk over to that plane!" he commanded sternly. "Show me where the loot is—the money and the gems taken from those jobs you pulled yesterday. Where was this loot to be taken?"

"That I do not know, either," Royo said. "A pilot was to come, but perhaps he was frightened away by the shooting. Yancey, he tells us nothing. We are not permitted to know his plans, for then if we are caught, we cannot talk for there is nothing to be said."

"I understand," the Black Bat said. "You and those who work with you are fools, Royo. This man Yancey has tricked you into believing you will share in the spoils. Like the beggars he exploits, you'll be left out. Men like Yancey don't share their loot."

Royo stared at the Black Bat with bulging eyes. Some of the fear had left him, for he was vaguely beginning to realize that he was dealing with a man who was honest, one who would render impartial justice.

The Black Bat clambered into the cabin plane, threw out three suitcases, then carried them over to where Royo stood. He had to use a knife to slit the leather bags, for they were securely locked.

From one tumbled an array of neatly stacked newspaper clippings cut to conform with the size of United States currency. From the other two bags came a mass of cheap jewelry. It took no more than

a glance to see what both suitcases held was worth practically nothing.

Royo's lips tightened. He even forgot the agony of his broken wrist. Then his temper boiled over and he emitted a string of curses.

"You're right, *senor!*" He faced the Black Bat. "We have been stupid fools! I believed there was real money and real gems in those bags. We were to divide it tomorrow, somewhere. I do not know where, that I swear. But free me—tell me where this Yancey is and I shall kill him! He left us nothing but the silk and we could never have disposed of it without his help."

The Black Bat eyed Royo narrowly. "And beside cheating you men who do all his muscle work, Yancey intends to also cheat the beggars whom he has organized. That is the truth, isn't it?"

Royo nodded mutely. The Black Bat called Butch to his side.

"Royo needs protection," he said. "Roll one of these trucks out of here. Near the city line, transfer to a taxi. Take Royo to a hotel. One of those cheap little places downtown. Stay with him. If anyone comes, shoot—and shoot fast! We're going to need Royo and the more time he has to think, the more he'll feel like helping us. Get him a doctor as soon as you get there. Have his wrist set."

"But these other guys?" Butch indicated the rest of the disabled mob. "You ain't going to let them get away, Boss?"

"They'll keep," the Black Bat said. "Before many minutes have elapsed, Sergeant McGrath will be told where he can find the stolen silk, and some of the men who stole it."

CAROL moved over to the Black Bat's side. She smiled confidently at him.

"And can I help in any way?" she asked.

The Black Bat nodded. "There is a farmhouse about half a mile up the road," he told her. "Go there and telephone for a taxi. If there are any questions, say your car has broken down. Have the cab come to this airport. When it stops, you get in and be sure the dome light isn't lit. Have the driver pass by Welfare Commissioner Manderson's home on Elise Road. Then go home and rest."

Carol nodded, and vanished in the darkness outside. The Black Bat climbed into the plane again and tried to discover some trace of its ownership. There was none. The wings bore the license number, but they could easily be forged or the plane itself might be a stolen one. At any rate there was nothing here to indicate that Yancey was not just a crippled, misshapen being with a heart crammed by murder and a lust for power and money.

It was almost an hour before the taxi rolled onto the field. Carol stopped it, got in and betrayed no surprise when the opposite door opened and the Black Bat entered.

He remained crouched on the floor so that the driver could not see him in the rearview mirror.

Carol gave her orders and the cab headed for the highway, whisking its cargo into the darkness.

CHAPTER XIV
Visitor in Black

PHIL MANDERSON, welfare commissioner, was holding an important meeting in his home. Seated around his spacious living room were six men.

Manderson was pacing the floor nervously. Jeff Garfield, parked in a deep leather chair, chewed on the end of a cigar. Tom Henning kept fingering his necktie, and looked around at the others. Three of the other men were important city officials, and the sixth was Police Commissioner Warner. His finely chiseled features were calm, and he puffed slowly on a curved pipe.

Manderson ceased his endless walking to face them.

"Now you all know what we're up against," he told them inclusively. "I've fought for months to have the beggars, both crippled and sound, taken care of. They can't help themselves and we've got to do it—the entire city. Despite all the adverse publicity that the beggars would never respond to our offer of shelter, food and rehabilitation, they have done so. After all, these people are human beings. They have to eat and they need a comfortable, sanitary place to sleep.

"That is why I have instituted this campaign to raise fifteen million dollars from the people of this city. I have devoted my spare time and some of my own money to help this worthy cause. All of you gathered here have also been helpful."

Jeff Garfield cleared his throat and stared at the glowing tip of his cigar.

"What you're really getting at, Manderson," he said slowly, "is that your whole pet scheme has gone haywire. Instead of the beggars taking things calmly, as they seemed to have done during the first days of the campaign, they have organized and now form one of the worst criminal gangs this city has ever known. The public is aware of this, and contributions to your fund have bogged down."

"Yes, of course that's it," Manderson declared irritably. "I just didn't want to put it so bluntly. Now you know. We're up against it. We've got to find a way out of this mess and get the public to subscribe to our cause again."

"How much has been collected?" Commissioner Warner asked.

"Almost ten million dollars," Manderson declared. "But that isn't enough. My goal is fifteen million and we need every penny of it. Mr. Henning"—Manderson faced the politician—"have you any suggestion to offer?"

Henning crossed his legs and scowled.

"Sure I have," he said promptly. "You got ten million dollars—okay. Use that, and forget the rest. You ought to know how everybody feels about these beggars. If I was in your shoes, I'd let 'em all starve to death. Do they appreciate help? Yes, they do! They give their thanks by trying to blow up that new dormitory and us with it.

"They did blast a Welfare Department garage into little pieces and they'll go further. They'll use force and spill blood until you have Commissioner Warner rescind the orders his men now have to drive all beggars off the streets. That's all I got to say. And don't ask me to attend any more of those dedication ceremonies. I had enough at the last one. Damn near got myself blasted to the sky."

Manderson turned red. "I don't agree. I think we should continue our efforts to raise more money. Fifteen million dollars, for a city of this size, is not too much to expect. The money so far taken in can be held in banks. It gives us a certain amount of credit so that we can go ahead with several of our projects. By the way, Mr. Garfield, you were to render a report on the problem of instituting a gymnasium and recreation building at the end of Carmody Street. That happens to be my next job, you know."

Jeff Garfield nodded. "It's finished. I'll have it in your hands tomorrow morning. Forgot the thing. Left it in my desk drawer at my home. Sorry."

TOM HENNING stood up suddenly.

"I've had enough of this," he growled. "Spending my valuable time talking over a lot of nonsense like this. Let the beggars shift for themselves. If our citizens want to support them by handing over nickels and dimes, that's their business. We ain't got no right to interfere. Me, I'm done. I resign from this wacky committee. Next time these beggars start things humming, I might not be so lucky as last time. I don't want my head blown off."

There was a rustling sound at the rear of the room. Henning turned swiftly and suddenly found that he could not even yell for help. A weird, ominous figure was standing just inside the French windows. The heavy drapes still moved slightly.

The Black Bat stepped forward. There were two guns in his hands and they were steady as rocks.

"Mr. Henning," he said in a calm voice, "aren't you unduly excited over the first attempt on your life? You weren't even there, you know. I saw you leave, in a great hurry, about five minutes before the bomb was set to go off."

Commissioner Warner sprang to his feet.

"Listen to me, gentlemen!" he cried, and held up his hands. "This man is the Black Bat. As an officer of the law, I should do all I can to arrest him immediately. But the Black Bat has helped us before and I think he is ready to try again. What he says about Henning is right. He did disappear from the platform—and in plenty of time to avoid being a victim of that blast. We've been so busy checking up on others that we haven't stopped to think of ourselves. Henning, your abrupt departure, which was so convenient to save your own skin, needs explaining. I demand that you inform us why you left."

Henning looked from Warner's stern features into the hooded face of the Black Bat. He rubbed his hands together and took several backward steps until the menace of the Black Bat's gun brought him to a halt.

"I—I forget," he quavered. "I—I didn't have anything to do with that explosion. You can't pin anything like that on me and I don't have to tell where I went or why, either. I know my rights and I won't talk. I haven't a thing to say."

Jeff Garfield frowned and arose. He nodded curtly in the Black Bat's direction.

"Henning," he said shortly, "you're a confounded fool! By not talking, you incriminate yourself. I've been doing a little investigating on my own, too. You've really nothing to hide. During those ceremonies I took movies of everything that transpired. I ran off the film a short time ago and it shows a uniformed policeman who can later be identified, delivering some kind of a message to you. Immediately after that, you left. We can contact that policeman and track down the message, so you might as well speak up."

Henning turned deathly pale and one hand clawed feebly at his throat.

"I—I haven't anything to—say," he managed.

The Black Bat moved forward. Manderson's three fellow commissioners were watching the scene intently. Here, in this lighted room, were intelligent men. The presence of the Black Bat gave them no soul-searing terror. They respected him—and the guns in his hands—but they were prepared to listen honestly.

They all realized that while the Black Bat's methods may have been unorthodox in the past, and that he could be convicted of crimes, that he was a man who worked on the side of the law.

"Well put, Mr. Garfield," the Black Bat said. "So you took moving pictures of the whole affair. Interesting. That means I am also included on that film, I suppose. But Mr. Garfield, can you explain why your shore mansion was used as a hideout by crooks associated with this beggar league?"

GARFIELD'S jaw dropped. "They used—my summer home? But this is the first I knew of it. You don't think that I gave them permission to—"

"There are several things you might find hard to explain, Mr. Garfield," the Black Bat said. "Perhaps in the near future you'll have an opportunity to do so. But for the moment I am only concerned with this crime wave. Within the last few hours the beggar league has struck again. How much was taken?"

"About fifty thousand dollars' worth of silk," Commissioner Warner said. "They raided two more jewelry houses and the loot from them has not been estimated yet."

"You forget," Manderson broke in, "that there was a seventy-thousand-dollar loss from the blowing up of the Welfare Department's garage, too."

The Black Bat thrust one gun into its holster, seized a straight-backed chair and pulled it toward him. He straddled it, facing the group of tense, worried men.

"I haven't forgotten it," he said. "Now gentlemen, here is how this devilish business is handled. There is a ringleader, a creature who calls himself Yancey. Who or what he is, I don't know—yet. He has organized the beggars into a huge group ready for anything. He has also enlisted a number of plain, everyday crooks. Some of these are killers; some skilled burglars. The beggars suggest the places to be robbed, study them and also act as outposts while the burglaries are carried on. Some of Yancey's men are expert bombers. They blow up a building at some strategic point, draw all available police to that scene, then perform their holdups."

"That will be circumvented," Commissioner Warner declared heatedly. "From now on radio cars will not respond to alarms of that nature. Instead they'll be immediately placed on the alert. I have canceled all vacations and leaves. My men are on twenty-four-hour duty. Any further holdups will be nipped before they get started."

The Black Bat nodded.

"Great! Tonight we've put a serious dent on the plans of this man Yancey. You, Warner, will take care that he doesn't get away with wholesale crime again. I have already done my share. His gang of killers is badly broken up. The silk that was stolen tonight has been recovered. By this time the eminent Detective Sergeant McGrath and a flying squad have reached an abandoned airport on the outskirts of the city where they have arrested part of the gang.

"The money and the gems stolen are still missing. Yancey has those hidden. Like all egomaniacs—and he is one—he intends to defraud even those who work with him. That is ended now, we hope. However, it isn't the end of Yancey. He is clever, shrewd, and capable. He'll have something else up his sleeve that will startle this entire city. He'll spring this soon."

As he spoke, the Black Bat arose and walked slowly toward the same window through which he had secured entrance. His gun covered them all. Curtains parted and then rustled back into place. The Black Bat was gone!

"He—he ought to be put in the—the chair," Henning quavered. "Scaring us like that. Maybe he is this man he calls Yancey. After all, the Black Bat is a crook or he wouldn't hide his face that way."

COMMISSIONER WARNER walked over to the window, closed it and then sighed.

"At least someone is actively campaigning against this beggar's league," he said. "That's more than any of us can do. Yes, Henning, you're quite right. The Black Bat does break the law, but only when he finds it necessary to run down some criminal who has broken more and greater laws than the Black Bat. Now, perhaps, you'll do a little accounting on your own. Just why did you leave the platform so conveniently?"

Henning growled something under his breath, walked into the hallway and jammed on his hat.

"I'm through listening to your accusations," he growled. "I'm as high up in the political life of this city as any of you, and I won't stand for your crazy questions. You, Manderson, can carry out these fool schemes of yours without my help. I'm through!"

The door slammed after Henning. Garfield looked around and smiled slightly.

"I suppose you're expecting me to do that same thing," he observed. "Don't worry—I'm sticking. That was a rather nasty accusation the Black Bat made, but if someone used my shore home as a rendezvous, they did it without my permission or my knowledge. What else he referred to, I haven't the vaguest idea, but I will say this—I don't trust Henning. He is in politics for what he can personally get out of it. He's a grafter, a relic of the old days of political domination."

"Then you think he may be this man Yancey?" Manderson asked in open awe.

"He hasn't the brains," Garfield said, and shrugged. "I'll be going now, gentlemen. We've done all we can for the moment. Those reports will be in your hands the first thing tomorrow, Manderson."

Garfield put on his topcoat, gloves and hat with methodical precision. When he left, the door closed with only a thud. Manderson mopped his forehead and sat down weakly.

"I don't know what to think," he said. "Henning—now Garfield. Maybe they are behind this beggars' organization. Henning isn't as stupid as Garfield thinks. If we could only do something—arouse public interest so we could raise the sum that is our goal!"

"Ten million dollars is a great deal of money,"

one of the other commissioners said. "Much could be done with it, and if all your plans can't be completed, the recipients of this great gift—the beggars themselves—have their own kind to blame. Their activities in connection with this crime wave have shied public sympathies away from them."

The Black Bat stepped out of the window, jumped to the ground and darted for the protecting darkness of heavy brush, for there was someone else lurking around this yard. The Black Bat had a glimpse of a short figure wearing a derby hat. The man was flattened against the trunk of a tree from which point he could watch the front entrance easily.

Henning came bolting out of the house and instantly the lurking figure moved after him. As he passed beneath a street lamp, the Black Bat caught a glimpse of him. It was Bride, the private detective whom Garfield had hired to trail Henning. Bride was certainly on the job.

Heading toward the rear of the yard, the Black Bat paused when he heard the front door open again, and watched Garfield emerge. The attorney and Parole Board member sauntered to the sidewalk and then stood there a moment, looking up and down. Finally he walked over to where his car was parked and drove off.

"Jeff Garfield," the Black Bat said softly. "I promised you a chance to answer a few question's and you're going to get that opportunity—sooner than you think."

CHAPTER XV
Murder's Hidden Hand

ON his return home, the Bat found Silk anxiously waiting for him. Carol had safely returned, Butch having phoned Carol from the hotel where he was keeping Royo company. Carol relayed the message to Silk.

"I can't see why you are keeping that killer undercover," Silk said to Tony Quinn mildly as he bustled about preparing a meal. "As I understand it from Miss Carol, he tried to murder her—you, too."

The Black Bat had removed the cape and hood. He was blind Tony Quinn once more. He sat in the kitchen now, staring with his apparently unseeing eyes at the blank wall.

"Royo is an odd person," Tony Quinn said, "A killer, yes, but not a double-crosser. The moment he learned that this Yancey intended to make off with all the loot, Royo was willing to talk. The trouble is that he knows nothing. That's been our difficulty all during this case. Yancey is just as mysterious a figure now as he was when those hoodlums of his stopped me with an invitation to join their beggars' league."

Silk removed a thick steak from the grill, deftly arranged it on a platter and Tony Quinn ate with relish.

"I haven't been of much help," Silk bemoaned. "All I did was get myself into a mess that you had to help me out of."

Tony Quinn looked up. "Silk, if you do nothing else but grill steaks like this one, I shall be indebted to you for life. But don't worry. There will be something for you to do before this ends. For the present remain here, close by the phone. I may need help, and need it fast. Butch isn't to be disturbed. I want Royo held safe!"

It was midnight when Tony Quinn stepped on his front porch for a breath of air. A patrolman walked by, called to Quinn cheerfully and received a wave and a smile. But the moment Quinn was inside again, he went into action. He stripped off his tweeds, climbed into the black clothing of the Black Bat and took two freshly loaded guns from his arsenal. He donned the wide-brimmed hat, grinned at Silk, and started down the ladder to the tunnel. The hood and cape of the Black Bat were safely stowed in his specially made pocket, as usual, ready for use when needed.

"The coupé is outside Butch's house," Silk called down. "I picked it up when Carol delivered your message, sir."

The Black Bat found the coupé and drove at a sedate speed toward the section of the city where Garfield made his home. Garfield was a bachelor and occupied one entire floor of an exclusive old-fashioned apartment house. A fire escape might have been the obvious way to get into that place to some—but to the Black Bat such a method seemed too obvious. He might have to use the fire escape as a last resort, but for his first try the Black Bat rested his hopes on the fact that the elevator operators would go off duty at midnight and leave the automatic lift for the use of tenants.

He discovered, however, that he could slip through the lobby and reach the staircase without being seen. Two minutes later, he donned his hood and cape, stepped before the door of Garfield's apartment and pressed the bell. He heard it buzz, but no one came in answer to the ring.

A frown crossed the Black Bat's forehead. He tried the door, but it was locked. Taking a flat, flexible piece of metal from a small kit, he inserted it in such a manner as to pry the spring lock back. The door opened swiftly. Lights burned inside. The Black Bat whipped out his gun, closed the door behind him, and softly moved forward to investigate.

HE stepped into a room hung with enlarged photographs. It was all Garfield's work, for he was an ardent photography enthusiast.

But the Black Bat's eyes did not rest on the pictures.

Garfield, in a lounging robe, was seated before a desk. Both arms were flung out on it limply and his head rested in the crook of one arm. The Black Bat sped to the man, looked down and grimaced. A knife had been plunged to the hilt in Garfield's back. He had died instantly.

The Black Bat looked around the room apprehensively, stalked through the other rooms, gun ready to shoot at a second's notice. But apparently only the dead held sway here.

"Halt!" he shouted, and dropped to a knee as he let go a shot.

Returning to Garfield's side, the Black Bat studied the objects on his desk. On the floor beside him was a small device through which motion picture film could be run and surveyed by the operator. It was still hooked up, its light casting an eerie shadow against the white ceiling. Garfield, then, had been engaged in running film through this machine so that he might study or edit it without all the bother of using a large projector.

Movie film! And Henning had been warned that Garfield possessed a film that might incriminate him.

Certain that he was alone with a dead man, the Black Bat tossed aside his cape and hood so that he could work more freely, and laid them in a chair with his wide-brimmed hat. Then he began searching the room carefully, looking for any signs of the film or any cuttings that Garfield might have made of it. There were none. Whatever evidence that film held had vanished when Garfield died.

One complete side of this room was lined with bookshelves and every inch of them filled with valuable books, mostly concerning the art of photography. Then the Black Bat's eyes narrowed. Some of those books had been moved, and recently.

Being a bachelor, Garfield evidently spent little time supervising the servants who cleaned up and dusted his apartment. There was plenty of dust on the bookshelves and between the books. The disturbance of that dust indicated that the murderer had prowled around.

The Black Bat pulled open the drawers of the desk at which the corpse was still seated. While the contents of the drawers seemed to be in order, there were minor things that informed the Black Bat of a careful search.

He saw Garfield's darkroom then, and entered it. Here was still more confusion. Strips of film had been unrolled and hurled into a corner. A few stills in negative form were damp, indicating that Garfield had done some developing just before he died.

Picking up several of these, the Black Bat whistled softly. He found an envelope and stowed these negatives away most carefully. In themselves they meant nothing, being only shots of famous statues in the city parks, but to the Black Bat they held a clue that might mean an end to this bizarre case.

Finished with the darkroom, he had just stepped into the study when at a sound at the window he whirled—just in time to see a dark figure leaping through. Instantly his gun was leveled at the window. Somebody—the murderer unquestionably—had been so safely hidden that he had escaped the Black Bat's search.

"Halt!" he shouted, and dropped to a knee, letting go with a shot when the dark figure only hurtled on through the window onto the fire escape.

THE Black Bat had started to rush to the window, intent on getting another shot at the killer he could hear clattering down the fire escape when he heard the front door bolt click.

Just in time he grabbed cape, hood and hat and faded into the darkroom again. Someone walked briskly through the apartment and came to a skidding halt. It was Detective Sergeant McGrath, quite alone. He saw the corpse and uttered a sharp exclamation. Then he headed for the telephone on the desk.

"Nasty mess, Sergeant," a voice announced.

McGrath's hand traveled toward his hip holstered gun, but stopped halfway there and remained, crooked and tense. The Black Bat, once more in hood and cape, stood five feet behind him, an automatic held in his steady hand.

"Now, Sergeant," the Black Bat said with a soft chuckle, "you know it isn't necessary to reach for a gun. I'm a harmless man until I'm riled. Just stand perfectly still while I fish out that cannon you lug around with you. That's it. You're extremely brilliant today, Sergeant."

McGrath's naturally thin lips grew even tighter.

"So you finally resorted to cold-blooded murder!" he accused. "I thought you would—sooner or later."

"Why, Sergeant!" the Black Bat protested in mock horror. "You don't mean to accuse me of murdering Mr. Garfield?"

"No? You don't think a bee stung him, do you? There's a knife in his back, and you're the only one here. You're here for no good reason and you're a criminal. What more evidence would a man want?"

"Quite a lot, Sergeant," the Black Bat answered grimly. "This man was killed by a knife, and you know I have never used a knife. My only weapon is this gun. A shot has been fired from it—but it was fired at the escaping killer. There is no bullet in this dead man. Or didn't you notice that on first glance?"

McGrath stared at the corpse a moment.

"It makes no difference," he grated. "You could have used a shiv. Maybe you had one tucked away in that phony outfit of yours."

"But I did not," the Black Bat said, "I assure you of that and I have never lied to you. And now, Sergeant, maybe you'll answer a few questions."

"I wouldn't give you the time!" McGrath bellowed.

THE Black Bat clucked his tongue sympathetically.

"But you're very unresponsive. Have you forgotten that I tipped you where to find that stolen silk and part of the beggar league's gang? I could have tipped some other officer, you know, but I consider you my friend. No other detective even occurred to me. I simply said to myself, 'McGrath is a good man, honest and courageous. If anybody

deserves to climb a success ladder, it's my good friend Sergeant McGrath.' Then I got on the phone."

McGrath grew slightly pink and shrugged in embarrassment.

"Okay, but this is off the record, understand? Maybe you have helped me. I'll even go so far as to admit it, but I've got a pair of handcuffs that are wasting away until the day they close 'round your wrists. But I'll talk. Garfield phoned headquarters about an hour ago—said he wanted to see me about something important. I happened to be out running down a clue on this Yancey guy. When I returned, the message was on my desk and I came right over."

"To find me here ahead of you—as usual." The Black Bat laughed. "You haven't any idea as to what Garfield wanted?"

"Not the slightest," McGrath answered. "And that's the truth! In fact, I hardly even knew him. He had a lot of good connections and was on the Parole Board, but we just never tied up. This is going to make a pretty smell in the papers. They're already full of editorials razzing us because we haven't stopped that beggar league yet. Now they'll open up with eighteen-inch guns."

The Black Bat nodded. "I would say that whoever gave orders for Garfield to be killed phoned you, Sergeant, but he was a little too fast about it. My showing up when I did didn't give the actual killer time enough to get away. Now don't get sore, Sergeant. I've got to do a rather disagreeable thing —for you. Back into that darkroom. I'll lock you in there, but if you haven't got your shirt sleeves rolled up, those must be muscles I see under your coat. You can break out in two or three minutes. Move, Sergeant! I wouldn't like to find it necessary to knock you cold."

MCGRATH grumbled, but he obeyed. There was no compromise between these two men. McGrath would have jumped that automatic in a second if he had thought there was the slightest chance of making it. But he had observed the Black Bat in action before, and knew just how fast and accurate he was with a gun.

McGrath gave in with ill grace. The Black Bat shot the bolt home, took a last look around the apartment and sped out. On the way down the stairs he stripped off his hood and cape and stowed them under his coat. When he reached the street only the most prying eyes would have noticed his scarred face.

He reached his car and drove away hurriedly. Five blocks from Garfield's place he heard sirens shrieking. That would be McGrath's work. The Black Bat thought of something else. McGrath suspected that Tony Quinn was the Black Bat. He might rush to Quinn's home.

The Black Bat turned into an avenue and stepped on it. When he pulled up near the garden entrance to his estate, he was out of the car almost the same instant it stopped. Streaking toward the garden house, he slipped into the tunnel and reached his laboratory. There was no sign of Silk, but a small red bulb glowed brightly above the laboratory bench, indicating that the front door was open. Quickly the Black Bat slipped out of his black clothing and into the baggy tweeds blind Tony Quinn effected. He picked up his cane, forced his nerves back to some degree of calmness and stepped into the living room.

He could hear Silk remonstrating with someone. Then McGrath's voice rose angrily.

"I'm coming in whether you like it or not!" he snapped. "You're stalling me, trying to cover up for Quinn. You'd like to have me leave so Quinn could slip back into the house. Well, he won't, because I've got the whole place surrounded. Quinn was with me just eight minutes ago, but he wasn't blind then and his name wasn't Quinn. He was the Black Bat."

Quinn sat down in his usual chair before the fireplace. His eyes went dead.

"Silk," he called out in a querulous voice, "what's wrong? Who is shouting so?"

Silk, at the door, felt a wave of weakness come over him. For two full minutes he had blocked McGrath's entrance without the slightest hope that Tony Quinn would return in time to avert McGrath's suspicion from becoming the real thing.

"It's Sergeant McGrath, sir," he called back. "I've been trying to inform him that you've been resting and don't wish to be disturbed."

"Let him in," Quinn said.

McGrath, his face beefy red, stalked across the room, came to a stop directly before Quinn and stood there, legs spread apart, jaw thrust out aggressively! Quinn raised his hand and his head moved in a direction about three feet from where McGrath stood.

"Glad you're here, Sergeant," he said. "I'm sorry if I kept you waiting. Blind men can't distinguish between night and day, you see. I frequently get my rest at all hours. It must be about six or seven o'clock now. I should really be awake and ready to receive visitors."

"It's after midnight," McGrath snapped. "And I think you fooled me again, although I'll admit I don't see how you did it. If I'm wrong, I'm sorry and I apologize. But if I'm right—well, one of these days I'll win this race, Tony Quinn. I'll get here before you drop your identity of the Black Bat."

QUINN'S lips parted in a broad grin and his scarred face screwed up in amusement.

"So that's it again! My dear Sergeant, as I have often told you, I'd sell my soul if I could be the Black Bat—even if it meant a man like you dog-

ging my steps every minute of the day and night."

McGrath mumbled something, glared at Silk and rushed out of the house. But Quinn did not move. McGrath was just clever enough to fake a departure while he turned back to peer through the windows. Silk sighed heavily.

"If I have to go through many more times like that, I'll be a wreck," he groaned. "I never thought you'd make it this time. What's happened, sir? Is anything wrong?"

"Too much," Tony Quinn's lips barely moved. "We build up a nice little case against Jeff Garfield and some disagreeable person came along and broke it down on us. Garfield is dead, Silk. Murdered!"

"I could have sworn it was him, sir!" Silk put in hurriedly. "His house was where I was held prisoner. Then there was that letter he wrote that detective, Bride, retaining him to watch Henning. What can we do about it, sir?"

"We can drink two rye highballs—strong ones, Silk. Then I've got to go out again. Private Detective Bride needs a shock and I'll do my utmost to provide it."

CHAPTER XVI
The Bat's Peril

DETECTIVE BRIDE was a sound sleeper and not until the lights of his room bothered his eyes did he awaken. The first thing his sleepily opening eyes saw was a dark shadow bending over him.

He gave a hoarse cry and reached for the gun under his pillow. A black-gloved hand seized the wrist and pinned it to the bed.

"You won't need a gun, for two reasons," a calm voice said in Bride's ear. "One is that you're already covered—and the other is that I won't harm you unless you bring it upon yourself."

Bride blinked a few times and the blurred shadow took shape. He saw the hooded head, the keen, piercing eyes that regarded him steadily. He saw the billowy cape and the automatic that was held about fifteen inches in front of his nose.

"G-g-gosh!" he quavered. "The Black Bat! I—I didn't know it was you, honest! I won't try anything. Ask me anything you want. I'll—t-talk."

"Good," the Black Bat said. "That's showing more sense than I gave you credit for. Perhaps I've misjudged you, Bride."

"M-maybe," Bride stuttered. "I ain't such a bad guy. M-maybe I have made my living on rotten divorce cases, but a guy has got to live. Theoretically I'm honest, I am."

The Black Bat chuckled. "Then give me an honest answer. Why did Garfield retain you at a fancy figure to check up on Henning?"

"Because he thinks Henning is a crook, and he's right! I think Henning is the big shot behind the cripple gang's organization, if you ask me. Things like that run in families, don't they?"

"What do you mean, Bride?"

"Well, that guy who was killed in the cabin where I met you last night. He was Henning's brother and—listen to this—he was sent up from another part of the state for second degree murder. Seems he helped rob a bank and kill a teller. You didn't know that, huh? Well, just leave it to Bride. What's more, this dead guy did break out of the prison—went right over the wall. Prison officials tell me he had plenty of the right kind of help, too. Me digging up that dope for him will cost Garfield a couple of hundred bucks."

The Black Bat shook his head slowly.

"Not Garfield," he said. "He was murdered a short time ago. Perhaps he already knew this—or too much of something else. Anyway, he's quite dead. Can you tell me anything else?"

It took Bride a couple of minutes to get over the shock of losing his meal ticket. Then his soul burned in rage for those who had murdered Garfield and, incidentally, forced Bride to go back to work.

"Maybe I can," he said, as the determination to get even gripped him. "Garfield had plenty on the ball, y'see? He was doing a lot of close study in this beggar situation—taking movie shots of beggars and trying to run down the guy who leads them. And I happen to know that Garfield hid the film, which he developed himself. Been in his apartment? Seen the room where he does all that photography work? Well, it's full of books anyway. Some of the books are the real things and some of them just shells, filled with film. Now what do you think of that?"

THE Black Bat's free hand reached out and grasped Bride's pajamas. He shook the pudgy little detective.

"Talk fast!" he commanded. "It may mean someone else's life! There are several thousand books in that room. It would take a man a week to run through them all and find the dummies. Garfield must have kept some kind of a catalogue system. Where is it?"

Bride licked his lips. He trusted this masked man, but he did not like those penetrating eyes. They seemed to seer deep into his soul, to sear into his brain and grasp his thought before he spoke them.

"Garfield was careful, see?" Bride said. "He figured somebody might try to get their hooks on them pictures, so he's got a safe deposit vault at the Security National Bank. In there he keeps a list of the pictures and where they are hidden."

The light suddenly winked out. Bride strained forward, ready to swing his feet to the floor.

"Stay where you are," the Black Bat warned.

"And Bride, if you value your life, don't tell another soul about this. In fact, it might be worth your while to remain indoors for a day or so, until this dies down. The man who murdered Garfield is no fool. He probably knows Jeff Garfield retained you; he might figure you know too much, also. Good night."

Bride just sat there, gaping. There was not a sound to indicate that the Black Bat had left, and he certainly must have moved through Bride's other room. Without lights, it would seem that he was bound to stumble over furniture. Yet his departure was as noiseless and mysterious as his coming.

The Black Bat returned directly to his home. His whole body felt the exhaustion brought on by many continuous hours of hard work. But there were a few precious hours left until morning and he must make the most of them.

"Silk," he said, "wake yourself at six. Put on your disguise—the one that makes you look like a benevolent person. Then waken me at eight. We must be at the Security National Bank when it opens in the morning. Bring a gun with you." At the indicated hour, Tony Quinn was awakened by a stout, pompous-looking man dressed in a cutaway coat and striped trousers, and with a white gardenia in his buttonhole to accent the white piping around the edge of his vest. Quinn grinned.

"Even McGrath wouldn't know you, Silk," he complimented. "Great stuff."

Tony Quinn whistled cheerfully as he showered and dressed. But when he walked downstairs to the first floor, his eyes had gone dead again, his face wore a resigned expression and he tapped his cane on each step to find his way down. He ate quickly while Silk locked up the house.

Ten minutes later they were traveling toward the business center and the ornate building owned by the great bank. Silk parked almost in front of the entrance, got out and carefully dusted off his knees. He nodded affably to a bank guard and entered the place.

Back in the car, Tony Quinn who wore dark glasses, kept his hat pulled low. Silk had a difficult job to carry out, but Quinn had plenty of confidence in Silk's smooth ways. He could convince a man born and brought up in Manhattan that the Queensboro Bridge would be a good private investment.

SILK nodded to everyone in the bank, walked down the steps to where the vaults were located and was practically pushed aside by a well-built man with gray hair and nose glasses. A guard stepped up to Silk.

"Sorry, sir," he apologized for the gray-haired man. "But Mr. Garfield seems to be in a great hurry this morning. Something I can do for you?"

"Garfield?" Silk almost lost his aplomb. "You mean that was Jeff Garfield who almost bowled me over? Did he take anything from his safety deposit box? I mean—oh, I'm completely befuddled this morning. Of course it was Garfield. He told me over the phone to meet him here.

"We're practically strangers, however, and I suppose he didn't recognize me anymore than I knew him."

As he spoke, Silk sidestepped to the stairs. He dashed up them and raced out of the bank as though a ghost pursued him.

In the coupé, Tony Quinn had one of the greatest shocks of his life. Slumped behind the wheel, he idly watched those who emerged from the bank.

He and Silk had been ten minutes late because of a traffic tie-up, and when he saw the man who looked like Jeff Garfield rush out of the bank and pass the car in which he sat he was momentarily stunned. So much was Tony Quinn disturbed that he actually raised the brim of his hat and slipped off his glasses. It was the closest he had ever come to revealing himself—and "Jeff Garfield" had looked straight at Quinn's face.

There seemed to have been absolutely no recognition, however, and Quinn sighed in relief. It had been years since Garfield had seen him as Tony Quinn. If this was Garfield.

Hastily he replaced his glasses and had the door open as Silk barged down the sidewalk. The man who looked like—or was—Garfield had stepped into a car, pulled away and was headed west.

Silk piled in, babbled something that Quinn could not understand, yet he knew what Silk meant. He started the coupé, wheeled into the traffic and started in pursuit. Then he suddenly changed his mind, turned around in the middle of the block and headed in the opposite direction.

"That was Garfield," Silk managed. "I thought you said he was dead."

"He was, last night." the Black Bat's face was covered with beads of sweat. "Silk, I'm afraid I slipped, for the first time in my life. When I saw that man come out of the bank, I forgot everything but the fact that a dead man walked abroad. I removed my glasses and turned up my hat. That man—Garfield or impostor made up to look like him—saw me. He wouldn't be apt to forget the scars, Silk. We've got to move fast."

"But where do we start?" Silk wanted to know.

"That man obtained Garfield's catalogue of films. He'll go to Garfield's apartment, sneak inside and find the evidence we need. Now listen carefully. There is a small cigar store directly across the street from Garfield's apartment. Go in there and stick close to the phone booth. Look up Garfield's phone number and if you see any signs of this man

who just got away, or any baggars or cripples, call me at Garfield's apartment. Don't fail, Silk."

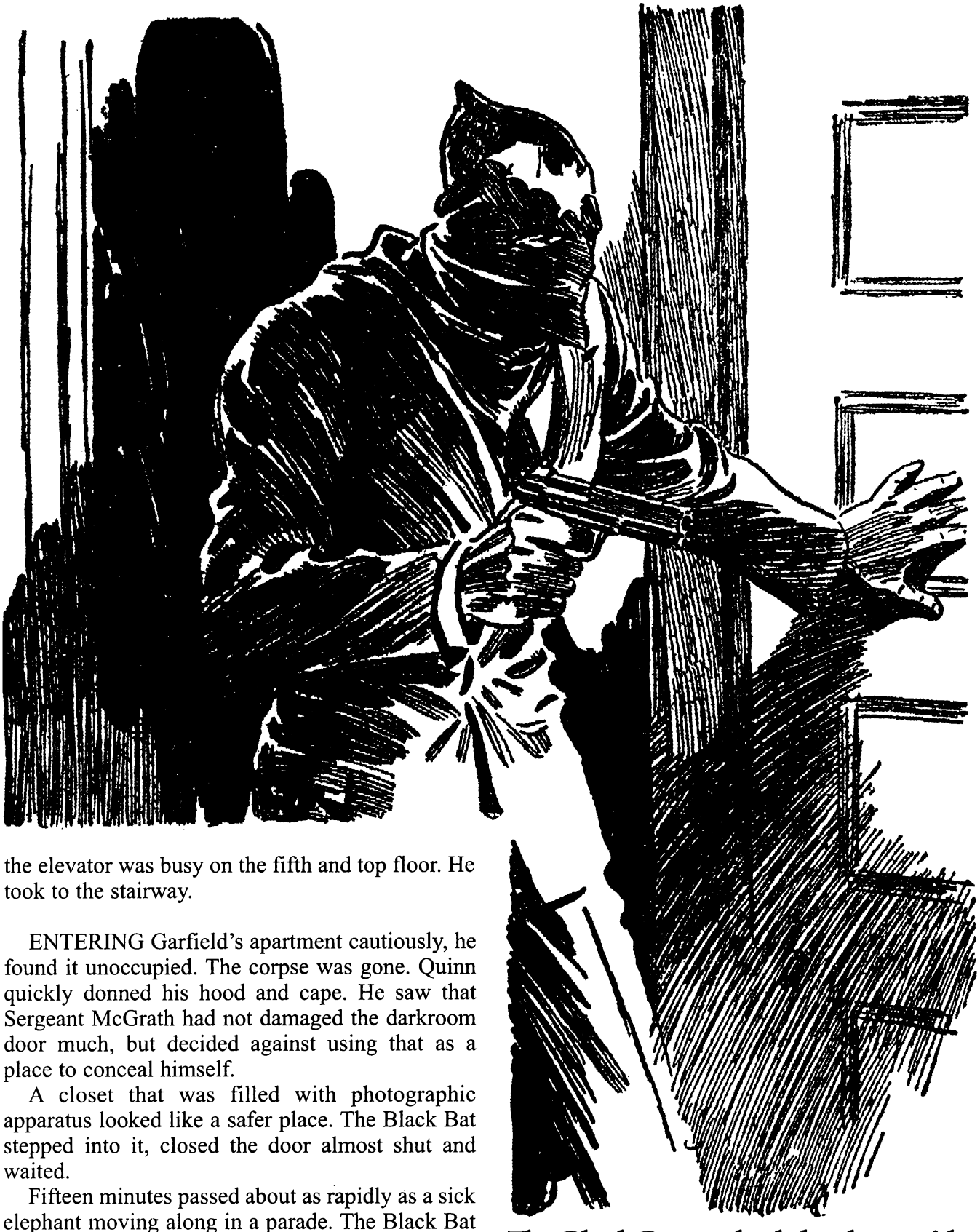
Quinn stopped the car in front of the elaborate apartment house in which was the Garfield apartment, got out and rushed across the sidewalk. He slowed up as he entered the lobby when he saw that the elevator was busy on the fifth and top floor. He took to the stairway.

ENTERING Garfield's apartment cautiously, he found it unoccupied. The corpse was gone. Quinn quickly donned his hood and cape. He saw that Sergeant McGrath had not damaged the darkroom door much, but decided against using that as a place to conceal himself.

A closet that was filled with photographic apparatus looked like a safer place. The Black Bat stepped into it, closed the door almost shut and waited.

Fifteen minutes passed about as rapidly as a sick elephant moving along in a parade. The Black Bat was saturated with sweat. Then his sensitive ears heard the lock turn in the front door. Footsteps were moving toward the study. Papers rattled and then someone grunted, as if reaching high.

The Black Bat drew his gun, thumbed off the safety and pushed the door wide. The man who looked like Garfield had his back turned toward the closet.



The Black Bat pushed the door wide. "Don't move!" he ordered crisply.

"Don't move!" the Black Bat ordered crisply. "Stand just as you—"

There was a swish behind his left ear. He started to whirl around. A gun butt cracked against his temple and he plunged forward to skid along the floor.

The man who looked like Garfield turned then and smiled evilly. The thug who had slugged the Black Bat was standing his ground, gun ready to deliver a killing shot if the Black Bat moved.

"We'll see who he is, huh, Boss?" he asked.

The man who looked like Garfield snarled an oath, "You fool, it's three minutes of ten. Let him lie there. Maybe the police can piece him together after we leave. Help me find that book of film. We can spend just one minute."

"Okay, Boss," the thug agreed reluctantly.

Together they attacked the bookshelves. One book was opened and a tin can of film rolled out on the floor. A strip of film was wound around the outside of it and this piece, about six or seven feet long, unloosened itself, remained coiled, and rolled beneath the desk.

The thug hastily picked up the can of film.

"We got it, Yancey!" he gloated. "Let's get outta here."

They raced for the door and the moment they disappeared, the Black Bat raised his head. The blow had stunned him, and even with returning consciousness, muscles, and nerves refused to obey the signals sent from his brain.

Grasping the edge of the desk, he pulled himself up, swaying drunkenly. His mind kept hammering the thought that in a matter of seconds something was due to happen. Probably a violent explosion—like the one that had demolished the Welfare Commission's garage.

The Black Bat reeled toward the door, then suddenly remembered that strip of film that had rolled under the desk and turned back. He got it and found that his outraged nerves were more or less returning to normal. He had reached the staircase, and taken about four or five steps down it when he heard the telephone in Garfield's apartment begin ringing insistently.

Then the whole building shook. The concrete,

There was a swish, and a gun crackled against the Black Bat's temple.

fireproof stairs cracked wide open. Debris dropped all around the Black Bat. He kept on going, however, and had his cape and hood off before he reached the ground floor. Amazingly enough the building did not seem to have been demolished.

A crowd of tenants were being herded to the street and the Black Bat mingled with them. Someone touched his arm. It was Silk, in disguise. The Black Bat slipped away from the crowd and raced to where he had parked the car.

"YOU got out of there just in time!" Silk gulped. "The whole top of that building was blown off! It was those beggars. I saw two of them go down the alley, find a piece of wire hanging from a window of Garfield's apartment, and hook a battery to it. I figured I was too late when I called."

"You did your best, Silk, and I'm not injured," the Black Bat said. "I met Yancey in there, disguised as Garfield, so it was not Garfield we saw at the bank and followed here. This fellow Yancey probably murdered Garfield last night, stole some of his clothes and went to the bank this morning passably disguised—and got the records that told where the film was hidden. But he didn't get all the film. I've got a few feet of something."

"Then what are you worrying about?" Silk asked. "Yancey didn't kill you, and you've got some of the film."

"Yancey didn't even try to see who I was after one of his men knocked me down. Do you know what that means, Silk? Yancey didn't have to look under the hood. He knows who the Black Bat is! He saw me in the car, in front of the bank. And when he discovers that nobody was blown up in Garfield's apartment, he'll know I'm still alive!"

Silk's face went grim. "Then I say let's find him and see that he'll never talk. I don't go for killing anyone, sir, but this man deserves to die."

The Black Bat wheeled the coupé toward the curb.

"No, Silk," he said soberly, "we don't operate that way. Park the car up the street a bit and then hurry back to the house. Don't forget to remove your disguise. Use the front door and if anyone is there, say you were out shopping."

CHAPTER XVII
Blind Emissary

NOT two minutes after he had reached his laboratory, the Black Bat pulled off his black clothing and had become Tony Quinn once more. His forehead wrinkled in thoughtful worry. Yancey—whoever he was—certainly had recognized Tony Quinn seated behind the wheel of that coupé.

It would not take much brainwork to reason that Tony Quinn had been watching the bank and that there had been no blind stare in his eyes when he jerked off those colored glasses. And then there was the explosion. What was the significance of it? To prevent the police from finding any clues in Garfield's apartment? But Yancey must know that they had examined it the night before.

Quinn sat down in front of the fireplace and forced himself to think calmly. Yancey was not finished yet. Perhaps his gang was broken up, but the league of beggars under his domination still existed. They had listened to his impassioned speeches, had been inflamed by his oratory and were ready to obey him when he ordered any kind of crime. The fact that two of them had blasted Garfield's apartment to bits proved that. Properly handled those beggars could become the greatest hazard this city had ever known.

Silk entered after a few moments and he was breathing hard.

"Big car pulling up, sir," he said swiftly. "Looks like Commissioner Warner. Maybe Yancey made an anonymous phone call, told Warner you are The Bat." He glanced out the window. "Wait! It is Warner—and Henning, Manderson and three other men."

Tony Quinn relaxed with an effort. His eyes clouded over and when his visitors entered the room, they found a blind man.

"Hello, Tony," Warner said. "We've come for your advice and help. But before we go into this, I want one thing understood. You can refuse to help us if you wish."

"I'll do all I can," Quinn said, "Who is with you, Commissioner? I heard many footsteps and several men are breathing."

"Phil Manderson of the Welfare Department is here. Tom Henning, a policeman, and three members of the Welfare Commission. Now, Tony, things have happened during the last few hours. The Black Bat is working on the case and he all but broke up the gang of killers hired by this unknown man who heads the crime wave. An hour ago I received a letter. I couldn't trace it, though I tried hard enough. I'll read this to you."

Warner took a folded piece of paper from his pocket, eyed Quinn sharply and read aloud. The letter ran:

> Commissioner Warner and Commissioner Manderson:
>
> There are ten million dollars on deposit in the banks of this city. The money was raised to support and control the beggars and cripples who reside here. The money is to be distributed to those people, and it is rightfully theirs.
>
> I hereby demand that this sum, in cash, be

turned over to me before midnight tonight. That gives you time enough to make withdrawals. I shall distribute this money myself and our organization known as the League of Beggars has full knowledge of my acts.

Unless you comply with my demand, I shall begin blowing up valuable property every ten minutes—commencing at midnight. The buildings are already wired, but so cleverly that neither you nor anyone else can detect the bombs, even if you are able to isolate the buildings. I gave you one example in the destruction of the Welfare Commission's garage; another but a short time ago when I partially destroyed an apartment.

It is my contention that you will concede to my demands, especially as the money will go to its original destination anyway. At any time between nine and eleven-thirty tonight you will have that money sent according to these instructions. I insist that someone we both trust carry it and that person must not see me.

Therefore I appoint ex-District Attorney Tony Quinn to become the emissary. Drop him in the center of the old airport where you captured some of my men. Leave him there with the money. He will not be harmed if these instructions are obeyed.

TONY QUINN'S face went white. Warner crushed the letter into a ball.

"It's nonsense!" the commissioner exploded. "Why does he want you to deliver the money? Of course you won't be able to identify him later—but dammit, man, I think there's more to his plans than shows on the surface. I won't permit it."

"Just a moment, Commissioner," Tony Quinn said. "I'll do it, of course. After all, it won't make much difference if anything happens to me. I will be ready when you are. This man has the upper hand. I think he will destroy property and lives if he isn't obeyed."

Warner sat down heavily.

"I'm against it—definitely," he said firmly. "I don't believe in paying ransom like this. But of course we must also consider the public. There will be lives lost. We're dealing with a madman, Tony. I haven't the slightest doubt but that he will carry out his threat."

"Pay him!" Tom Henning broke in, "Give him the ten million. Nobody will kick. Those beggars won't let him get away with all the money. He says they know about this demand. Maybe it will quiet them, give the police time to run down the ringleaders. If they bomb a building every ten minutes, the loss will be more than ten million anyway."

Manderson spread his hands in a gesture of resignation.

"I have gone on record as being against this gigantic swindle, but I've been outvoted. I shall endeavor to have the cash in Mr. Quinn's hands by six o'clock tonight even though the task is a superhuman one."

"You wouldn't consider faking the payment?" one of the other commissioners volunteered. "Have the field surrounded and bag these devils? If they get away, they won't have the money."

"But they still have their damned bombs," Henning broke in. "Are you crazy?"

Commissioner Warner closed his eyes wearily.

"Then you'll go, Tony? Despite the fact that you may be—killed?"

Tony Quinn sat as immovable as a Buddha for more than a full two minutes.

"Yes, I'll go," he finally said, in a resigned voice. "If someone's life must be risked, it is better to chance that of a man who hasn't much to live for. I will be ready."

A great sigh went up from the delegation. They eyed Tony Quinn as if he were in a death cell, with his head shaved and his trouser leg slit for the electrode. They filed out slowly, all but Commissioner Warner. He put a friendly hand on Quinn's shoulder.

"It's amazing to me why this man should insist that you become the messenger. Unless he happens to be someone who has reason to hate you or—"

"Yes, Commissioner?" Quinn asked quietly. Warner shrugged. "Forget it. I was getting softheaded like McGrath. With my next breath I'd have accused you of being the Black Bat and reasoning that perhaps this man Yancey had also guessed the same thing. I'm sorry, Tony. That can't be the reason. Can it?"

Tony Quinn smiled slowly. "A score of eminent physicians told me I could never see again. Obviously the Black Bat has the use of his eyes and just as obviously, I haven't. So that's that."

A peculiar expression crossed Warner's face.

"But if the Black Bat could hear of this, Tony, he might do something. My hands are tied. I don't even know what the public's reaction will be to all of this. Possibly I'll be booted out of office, Manderson along with me. Those are the chances I take. Yours is much greater. If I ever before hoped that the Black Bat would take a hand, I hope so now. I'll return at about six—with the money and a car. I'll drive you to the rendezvous myself."

WARNER strode out of the house. As the door closed, Silk emitted a shout of horror.

"You're not going through with it, sir! Can't you see? Yancey was the man disguised as Garfield. He did see you, recognized you, sir. All he wants is to get you where he can put a knife through your

heart, as he did through Garfield's, or a bullet through your head. You're not going!"

"But of course I am," Tony Quinn said gently. "This is the most direct challenge the Black Bat has ever had, Silk. I've got to answer it if for no other reason than to prevent destruction of property and loss of life. But we'll think this over. There are several hours before night. Incidentally, I haven't had time to look over that strip of film. It's in the laboratory. Let's get going, Silk."

Silk pulled down the window shades. Quinn got up and walked rapidly to the secret door. He turned on powerful lights in the lab, held the film up to them and studied it closely. Then Silk took a turn at it. He laid the film down with a gesture of disgust.

"You must have got the one part that wasn't worth anything, sir. This just shows the men on the platform at the dedicatory services. There's nothing here to indicate who the killer is."

Tony Quinn laughed dryly.

"Your eyes are as bad as Tony Quinn's are supposed to be," he chided. "There is a clue here. This strip of film is made up of several sections. The action of it is very fast. It tells me exactly who Yancey must be. Guard it.

"Now we'll get down to business. Yancey will carry out his threat to bomb certain buildings. His beggar crew must have their orders already and there must be some means by which all of them can be notified whether or not to act. We must find that means, Silk. But even more than that, we must prevent those beggars from obeying the orders. There is one way. One solitary way."

Quinn dipped his hand into his pocket and took out a crumpled piece of paper. He smoothened it and grinned at Silk.

"Tony Quinn has resorted to picking the pocket of the Police Commissioner, no less. I needed this letter, Silk. Here is what you must do. Go to the hotel where Butch is guarding Royo. Royo is to be persuaded to help. This letter will influence him. Royo knows the key men among the beggers. He must play the Black Mass, attract every beggar who belongs to the organization. Tell him to have them assemble in the old factory where they held their first meeting. They will obey Royo. Hold them there until I arrive. Under no circumstances must a single one be permitted to leave. If I don't appear by eleven, you will carry out the orders I shall write down for you. Is that clear, Silk?"

"Yes," Silk answered sadly, "but it means I can't help you, sir. I ought to be around. I could manage. Why not let Butch take care—"

"Butch hasn't the persuasive tongue that you possess, Silk. No, it's you and no one else. Now run along and fix me something to eat. Soon as that's done, find Butch and get started."

CHAPTER XVIII
Into the Jaws of Death

MURKY dusk of late autumn parted for the headlights on Commissioner Warner's car. Tony Quinn sat beside him in the front seat, and stowed away in the back were three suitcases jammed with currency. They turned off the highway and rolled to the center of the deserted aviation field.

"Nothing of this has been made public," Warner said. "No one except those who were in your home this afternoon is aware that this is the rendezvous, so you won't be bothered. Still feel capable of carrying it out, Tony?"

"Perfectly," Tony Quinn replied. "I'm not afraid. After months and months of darkness one loses fear, Commissioner. I'll carry out my end of the bargain."

"But I'm worried," the commissioner said uneasily. "Frankly I can't understand why this Yancey doesn't just have us place the money somewhere and let him pick it up. Why in the world does he insist that you deliver it? Well, it's too late to argue those points now. Here is where you get off, Tony. I'll get the bags of money out of the back. Wait, I'll find you a comfortable spot to sit down."

Warner took Quinn's arm, led him to a small knoll and then brought the three bags of currency. He placed these beside Quinn, hesitated a moment. "Good luck!" he said curtly. He marched toward the car and drove away at a furious rate of speed.

Quinn did not move nor did he permit his mask of a blind man to fall from him for a single second. Yancey certainly knew Quinn was the Black Bat, but did Yancey realize that Quinn also knew this? That Quinn knew very well why he had been selected as the emissary?

It was ten minutes after nine and things would happen soon now. The distant roar of an airplane motor caught Quinn's ears. He did not look up, but as the roar increased, he caught a glimpse of a plane circling the field in wide swathes, probably checking traffic along the highway to be sure no trap was set.

Finally the plane came down in a perfect landing. It taxied right up to where Quinn was huddled, his cane held tightly in both hands. A man got out and Quinn's eyes penetrated the darkness to study him.

Silk's description had been a good one. Yancey was indeed a sight to behold. The thick yellow shock of hair stood out like that of an African bushman. His hunched shoulder gave him an eerie appearance. He walked with a slight limp and there was a gun in his hand.

"Tony Quinn!" Yancey said in a shrill voice. "So you did come, after all! You have the money?"

"Yes—beside me." Quinn did not look at

Yancey. His gaze was centered a foot to the left.

Yancey knelt beside the bags, kept an eye on Quinn and started to open them. He ran his hands through the currency inside and gloated in high satisfaction. Then he arose.

"Pick up two of those bags and walk toward the plane," Yancey said. "I'll take the third bag and also the end of your cane to guide you. Come on—get going."

Quinn fumbled around, grasped two of the suitcases and Yancey took a grip on the cane thrust under Quinn's right arm. They made their way to the plane, but as they neared it, Yancey suddenly tripped Quinn. He dropped to the ground himself, clapped a hand over Quinn's mouth and signaled the pilot.

The plane took off instantly. To any observing eyes it would certainly have seemed that Yancey had put his hostage into the ship, got in himself and was now in the air heading for some secret hideout.

"CRAWL," Yancey ordered Quinn sharply. "Crawl behind me and keep those bags of money with you. Soon as we're out of sight of the road, you can stand up again."

It was a clever plan, calculated to throw any possibility of pursuit far off the trail. Quinn reasoned that they would head for the old hangar, but Yancey maintained a course well away from it. They reached the edge of the field, arose, and Yancey led the way along a winding trail. Thus Quinn saw a crude shack loom up, well hidden in the brush.

Yancey took a key from his pocket, glanced at Quinn sharply and stepped before the door. He unlocked it, stood aside and gave Quinn a hard shove.

Quinn tripped, fell heavily and landed on a rough board floor. Yancey closed the door instantly, turned on lights and dropped into a chair. His gun was pointed straight at Quinn.

"You can get up now," he said coldly. "Don't bother to pretend you are blind any longer. That was a good act until I saw you outside the bank this morning. You gave yourself away then, Mr. Black Bat!"

Quinn drew a long breath of resignation. He got up, dropped the dead look in his eyes and selected another crude chair. He glanced around the shack, saw that it was sturdily built and without windows. Evidently Yancey must have had the place erected while he and his men were in possession of the hangar and the flying field. It was a perfect hiding place.

"Well?" Yancey crossed his legs and smiled tightly. His small eyes burned evilly from beneath the bulging forehead. "You're not going to deny this, are you?"

Quinn shoved his hat to the back of his head.

"No, I'm not," he said. "Anymore than you'd deny that disguise you're wearing doesn't hide someone pretty well in the know of things."

"You're a clever man, Quinn," Yancey said, as he leaned forward. "Much too clever to live—unless you happen to be on my side. How about it? I've money enough to finance the greatest crime ring the world has ever known. I've got hundreds of beggars just aching to do as I command. If you hadn't shown up tonight, they'd have gone into action. You remember Commissioner Manderson's gentle appeals for contributions? Those billboard posters he has posted all over town? Well, at midnight some of those posters would have been smeared with one word—'Strike!' That was the signal and, it still holds good, so no tricks."

"No tricks," Quinn said softly. "What's the next move, Yancey? You know my answer to your proposition."

Yancey shrugged. "There's only one next move, Quinn. You get it. You've broken up my boys pretty well. You took fifty thousand dollars' worth of silk I could have sold easily. You came close to getting some concrete evidence against me at Garfield's place. And, by the way, wasn't that a good disguise? The safe deposit guards treated me with kid gloves. Lucky the morning papers hadn't printed the news of Garfield's murder.

"But I thought you were well taken care of when I left the apartment. Apparently you're a very rugged person, Quinn. Hardly rugged enough to withstand nine forty-five caliber bullets plowing through your body, though. I'm going to make sure you're quite dead before I leave."

QUINN sized up the distance between himself and the killer. He watched the heavy gun narrowly. There was no use trying to jump it. Yancey was much too ready to squeeze the trigger.

Yancey favored Quinn with another leer.

"I've some more good news for you. You'll die, Tony Quinn, but the Black Bat will go on living. I shall adopt that identity and disguise. Everyone will think you've simply joined my boys, and that I control you.

"I must admit your reputation in the underworld is amazing. The mere mention of your name makes those stupid dolts shiver. So I shall become the Black Bat as well as Yancey, the leader of the League of Beggars. If that information makes your dying any harder, you're quite welcome to it. Well—shall we get it over with?"

Both of Quinn's feet were planted squarely on the floor. His arms looked relaxed, but they were tense, pressed against the arms of the chair he occupied. He was like a powerful spring, ready to break into action the moment there was an opening.

Yancey's casual manner of speech did not fool Quinn. The killer's trigger finger was white against the firing mechanism of the gun. Quinn decided to bluff for time.

"Of course, you know it will be over for you as well as for me, Yancey," he said. "You slipped a little. Did you notice that certain portions of the film you took from Garfield's apartment had been cut? Garfield did that in building up a short film summary of the evidence against you. That portion of the film I have, and when I do not return it will be turned over to Commissioner Warner immediately."

Yancey's hideous mask of a face went even more awry with rage.

"But you forget, Black Bat, that I have ten million dollars here!" he shouted. "Such a sum is sufficient for any man to live like a king. If you speak the truth, then I shall merely depart and change my identity. But enough of this talk. It's the end for you, Tony Quinn. I'm almost sorry to kill you, for the stupid police gave me no competition at all. It's coming!"

Quinn steeled himself against the shock of the bullets that would plow into his body. All he hoped for was strength enough to take them and also reach Yancey.

In one split second he would have leaped, but something heavy and hard thudded against the wall of the shack. Yancey gave a cry of surprise and fear, turned his head toward the door and presented Quinn with the one chance for life.

Quinn was practically sailing through the air when something else happened. The lights went out in the shack. Yancey's gun spurted flame and death and the bullet ripped by Quinn's face. But the favorable balance was on Quinn's side now. He could see through this intense darkness, while Yancey was handicapped by it.

Yancey fired two more shots, aiming wildly and hoping that Quinn might be in the path of at least one slug. Then a powerful hand seized Yancey by his gun arm, lifted him completely off the floor and hurled him into a far corner. Half stunned, Yancey tried to raise his pistol, but a well aimed foot connected with his gun hand. His knuckles were crushed by the impact and the weapon went flying across the shack.

Quinn stepped back a pace, crouched and prepared for the rush that would give him Yancey, a prisoner thoroughly cowed and helpless. He hesitated. For how could blind Tony Quinn walk into Police Headquarters and turn over a murderer who knew he was the Black Bat?

THESE thoughts brought Quinn's actions to a temporary halt. Yancey sensed the indecision. Suddenly he came up from the floor in a wild charge. Quinn tried to sidestep the rush, but Yancey seized one leg, brought Quinn down with a thud that shook all the wind out of him.

Yancey flew across the cabin, and landed on the floor near the door. He was up in a flash, though, had the door open, and was racing into the night. Quinn was after him. No matter whether or not he was revealed as the Black Bat, Yancey must not get clear. He would give the alarm that would result in a score of deadly bombings!

But fear lent speed to Yancey's legs. He dived through thick brush and for a second even Quinn's eyes could not see him. Then Quinn heard a car door slam, a starter whine and tires screech against soft ground. Quinn made a wild grab for the running board and door of the car, but he failed. Yancey's taunting laugh floated back. The killer was on his way to do more murder!

Quinn went numb with apprehension. He was stranded out here, miles from any hope of rescue and impeded by the fact that he must act as Tony Quinn and not as the Black Bat. Then he heard the crackle of brush and spun around. Someone was coming. He saw a dim figure gradually materialize into a familiar one.

"Carol!" he called. "Carol—this way!"

Carol came running when she saw him. Her arms went about his neck and for a moment Quinn forgot about such things as murder and bombings. He held her at arm's length.

"You're an answer to a man's prayers," he said fervently, "but there is no time for explanations now. Carol, have you a car handy?"

"Behind the hangar," Carol said. Quinn drove, sending the car at full speed along the highway. Yancey would not beat him to town by much and it would take him a little time to issue his signal for the beggars to strike. By this time Silk should have most of the beggars at the meeting place where they would not see Yancey's orders.

"Now," Quinn glanced at Carol—"how'd you reach me in time?"

Carol shivered. "I almost came too late. Silk told me Butch was busy and you had refused his help, made him swear to carry out other orders. Silk said I was the only one left to—to—

"Oh, Tony, I knew of the meeting place. I came here long before Warner brought you. I hid the car behind the hangar and climbed to the roof. I watched the plane land and saw Yancey take you prisoner. I lost you then, until I discovered this cabin.

"I could hear Yancey speaking, but I couldn't make out his words. I knew he would have a gun trained on you so—I threw a big rock at the side of the cabin to take his attention away from you. Then I broke the wires that supplied electricity to the shack. There was some kind of a motor in a small shed behind the cabin. One of those little engines, or whatever you call them, to generate juice."

"Someday," Tony Quinn said thoughtfully, "when the Black Bat has finished his work, Tony Quinn is going away and you're going with him. And Tony Quinn won't be blind any longer."

SHE placed a hand on his arm gently.

"Tony, I know what you mean and I'm happy, very happy—but the Black Bat must go on living. You must understand that, and I—I'm satisfied."

Quinn grinned at her. "I knew you'd say that. Now, I'll drop you somewhere. Go straight back to your room and stay there. You have been more or less openly active in this mess and someone may try to tie you up with the Black Bat. That must not happen. You're much too valuable to go into retirement. Here we are and don't worry about me. I've got Yancey tied up in knots."

Carol climbed out and watched the car shoot toward Tony Quinn's estate. Quinn was in a hurry now, but he had to get the Black Bat's outfit, for the most perilous part of the whole case lay before him.

CHAPTER XIX
Meeting of the League

UNDER a battery of bright lights, Silk stood alone on a platform and addressed the motliest crowd of humanity he had ever seen. Several hundred beggars had come in answer to the signal notes of the Black Mass. But they were nervous, impatient for some reason.

Only Mexican Royo's presence saved them from bolting. They clamored for Yancey and a cut of the loot so far taken. Silk glanced at his watch. In one minute it would be twelve o'clock, the Black Bat's deadline. Then the lights suddenly grew brighter than ever. A weird, black clad figure moved into the center of them and stood beside Silk.

It was the Black Bat! He held up his hand.

"You men who form the League of Beggars," he said, "you know who I am. As the Black Bat I have fought you, fought your leaders, but always with your future in mind."

A few catcalls and curses answered that, but for the most part the beggars were quiet. There was something in the quality of this hooded man's voice that demanded full attention and compelled supreme confidence in the speaker.

"You are led by a man who calls himself Yancey," the Black Bat went on. "He has promised that with your organization and his leadership all of you will be rolling in wealth. That is a bald lie. Yancey is a man who plays both ends against the middle. The profits from this wave of crime and murder would revert to his pockets alone. I have a witness who will prove it—a man who is one of your number and was Yancey's first lieutenant."

The Black Bat signaled and Royo climbed on the tiny platform. For five minutes he talked, emphasizing his sentences with choice oaths. He described how Yancey had taken all the money and gems looted from banks and jewelry houses, how he had passed off fakes to satisfy the suspicions of his men. From the assembled crowd came an ominous muttering, but they were not yet entirely convinced.

The Black Bat drew a letter from beneath his cape and read it aloud.

"This," he explained when he had finished, "was sent by Yancey to Commissioner Manderson, forcing him to give up the money collected for your benefit. This money was turned over to Yancey and he planned to make away with it, leaving you men to face the music.

"Had his trick worked, all of you would have been doomed. You couldn't beg any longer because the citizens of this city or any other would refuse to part with a penny. This was their money, donated to all of you. Organized charities would have refused you admittance to their shelters. The police would round up everyone of you. And all the while Yancey would be living somewhere—off your ten million dollars."

THE muttering grew louder. A man with a withered arm hobbled up close to the platform.

"Me, I says you tell the truth," he said jerkily. "Mask or not, work against us or with us, I believe you. I was supposed to set off a bomb tonight. It's in the west wing of the branch post office on Ely Avenue. But I ain't gonna set it off. I'm done with this business and if these other grifters are wise, they'll be washed up with it, too. I don't want to rot in prison."

The Black Bat held up both hands. "That is what I wanted to hear," he said heartily. "The ten million dollars are safe. That money belongs to you—for your welfare. Those others of your number who know where bombs are planted will step forward while Royo makes a list of those places to be turned over to the police.

"If a single bomb explodes, you men know what will happen. You, as a class, will take the brunt of the blame and suffer for it. Yancey will provide you no help, because he is done for. This city is run by competent, honest officials who will care for you far better than Yancey can—or would. Will you accept my word that none of you will be harmed, except possibly those who have actually committed murder?"

A ONE-ARMED man swept forward. His one hand held a knife and he tried to climb on the platform while he shrieked curses against the Black Bat. A well-aimed crutch caught him across the temple. A cane banged against the back of his neck and he went down.

"He killed that detective, Shannon!" someone

shouted. "He did it with a knife. Yancey put it in his hand. That's why he won't listen to you. But we'll take care of him."

Suddenly every light in the place winked out. The beggars were stunned for a moment, but recovered their wits when the lights flashed on again. Royo summoned them closer and obtained the addresses where the bombs were placed. There was no longer any sign of the Black Bat.

Outside the abandoned building, Butch had the coupé ready and the Black Bat piled in. Butch was grinning from ear to ear.

"Boss, wasn't that a swell piece o' work?" he wanted to know. "That guy Royo was a tough egg and bad, too, but he's changed. We went out together and he rounded up the cripples who were to give the signal for the meetin'. We got almost every one of 'em. Now where do we go, and is there somebody's nose I can punch in? I ain't had no action at all so far."

"No noses to punch in," the Black Bat said with a laugh. "Something far more important. Butch, you've got my career in your hands. Listen carefully and don't fail me. This is the most vital commission I've ever given you."

Butch listened while his face lit up in glee.

POLICE Commissioner Warner, a half-smoked cigar held listlessly between his fingers, stared at the floor. Phil Manderson, Welfare Commissioner, had been sitting uneasily at his desk for an hour. Tom Henning clawed at the end of his necktie and muttered to himself. In a corner Private Detective Bride sat dejectedly regarding a handcuff that encircled one wrist while the other link was hooked to the sturdy arm of the chair he occupied.

Warner looked up. "I can't stand this suspense!" he announced. "We know that Quinn was taken aboard an airplane, but even with the help of Army pursuit ships, we haven't been able to locate that bandit plane. Quinn is probably dead and we're his murderers. Sending a blind man to a task like that was the craziest thing I've ever done."

Manderson nodded somberly. "I agree. In my estimation Quinn is dead, this man Yancey has the money, and he'll blow up those buildings at midnight anyway."

"Every available man on my force is searching important buildings for traces of those bombs," Warner said. "So far not one squad has reported finding one. We're licked, gentlemen. We've been pounded to a pulp by a murderous maniac and there is no telling when he will strike again."

"And it's all your fault, Manderson," Henning grated. "If you'd minded your own business, let those beggars keep on chiseling the public, this wouldn't have happened. Now, what have we got to show for your work? Nothing! Nothing except a sneaky private detective who insinuated things and can't prove them—asking me for ten thousand dollars to keep his mouth shut. I haven't anything to be afraid of. Why, he acted as if I might be this man Yancey!"

HENNING faced Bride with a scowl, but the private detective did not look up. A clock in the hallway boomed twelve times and a groan went up from everyone in the room.

"Ten minutes before the first explosion occurs!" Warner jumped up. "Damned if I'll simply sit here and do nothing but hope and pray. I'm giving the order to round up every beggar this city has ever known. Some of them must know something! And they'll talk if I have to wring their blasted necks to make them! I'm through catering to you and your tender feeling for those men, Manderson. I'm going to get some action."

Warner was almost at the door when he paused and turned around slowly. A distinct cold draft was blowing through the room, and Warner was sure every window had been closed up until this moment.

"The Black Bat!" he cried eagerly, thankful for his appearance.

Everyone turned, with muttered explanations of surprise. The Black Bat stood just inside a window. The cool breeze wafted his cape high, and the lights cast a weird shadow against the wall.

The image of a great bird with wings outspread!

CHAPTER XX
Cards on the Table

GOOD EVENING, gentlemen," the Black Bat said quietly. "There is no need to be alarmed. No explosions will take place and the beggars have all been pacified. I convinced them that they have been wrong and were merely tools in the hands of this man Yancey. The ten million dollars ransom sent Yancey with blind Tony Quinn as the emissary has been recovered. Quinn is also quite safe, although possibly a little distressed at the moment. I couldn't take him with me, naturally, but he'll find his way home. Yancey didn't treat him very well."

"Then you have killed Yancey?" Manderson asked hopefully. "He is no longer a menace to us? We can go ahead with our plans just as before?"

"Why not?" the Black Bat asked. "Your plans, Mr. Manderson, are ideal ones. I have been interested in them for weeks. Removing the beggars from the streets of this great city is an admirable task, and providing them with quarters and a comfortable living is as humane an endeavor as I have ever noted."

"Thank you." Manderson bowed his head slightly. "No man will ever condemn the Black Bat again when I am within hearing. I'm not even asking you if you are certain Yancey will not take steps to get revenge against us. I believe you—have the most profound faith in you."

Henning stepped forward until he stood almost beside Manderson, but facing the Black Bat. "That ten million—you didn't swipe it?" he sneered. "I heard you're not above taking a cut."

"The money," the Black Bat said calmly, "has been inserted through the night depository of the Security National Bank. It would be well to notify the bank officials of that fact. They may be rather surprised to find such a sum in their night depository."

Manderson sat down slowly. "I can go ahead with my plans! I can finish my work!"

"Even to completing the project at the foot of Carmody Street," the Black Bat said. "That is one of the most worthy of them all. You are ready to go ahead with it—plans and everything?"

"Certainly," Manderson, said. "I've got them in my desk here right now and—"

His hand moved toward a desk drawer. Then he paused and a horrible change came over his features. But there was an interruption. The front door of Phil Manderson's house opened and Detective Sergeant McGrath strode in. He saw the Black Bat, started forward impulsively, but Commissioner Warner grabbed him.

"None of that, McGrath," he warned.

The Black Bat paid no attention to the detective sergeant. He strode toward Manderson and the gun in his hand covered the Welfare Commissioner, as Henning started forward, startled.

"So you have the plans in your desk, Manderson. Interesting! You see, Garfield didn't give them to you the last night you saw him. He was going to get them in your hands the next day. But Garfield didn't live until the next day. He was murdered that night—by a man he knew because he let him in and apparently trusted him.

"Garfield put up no fight against his murderer because he didn't know death was so close at hand. But you went to Garfield's apartment that night. You went there and asked him for those plans. He gave them to you, but that was only an excuse. You wanted to kill him and get the film he had taken of the ceremonies at the new dormitory building."

MANDERSON staggered back a few steps.

"You're mad!" he shouted,

"You're the one who has gone mad," the Black Bat shot back. "You are Yancey. You deliberately started this campaign to raise money for the beggars so you might get it all. Then, to cover up your tracks, you organized the beggars, persuaded them to become out-and-out criminals. You grew bolder as you realized the power you had gained. But Garfield suspected you. He also suspected Henning and hired this private detective Bride to trail him. Bride discovered a lot of things, among them that Henning had a brother in prison and that he escaped."

"Yes, and plenty more, too!" Bride shouted. "I didn't tell anybody, because the police grabbed me, put cuffs on me and here I am. If I talk, I'll only railroad myself into a nice mess."

"You'll talk," the Black Bat said, "because I know just about everything you do. Manderson is under arrest now—and well covered by my gun."

Bride glared at Detective Sergeant McGrath, looked toward the Black Bat and gulped.

"Okay," he said. "Henning's brother knew Manderson was a crook. Manderson gypped plenty of people—the city, too—and did it so nobody ever got wise. But some of the boys tied up with him got caught and went into stir. They met Henning's brother and spilled it. Henning, at the ceremonies for the new dormitory, was called to his brother's side. The brother got a nice, fat bribe from Manderson, but Manderson got it back after one of his hoods killed Henning's brother."

The Black Bat paused an instant, then went on quietly.

"And Henning was lured there by a faked message for two reasons," he said, "First, to throw suspicion on him, and secondly, so that Henning might realize what would be coming to him if he became too aggressive. Henning did leave the ceremonies before the bomb was due to go off. It did look suspicious—but Manderson left the platform, too.

"Presumably he went to unveil the statue, but the movie film that Garfield took shows Manderson eyeing his watch every five seconds and glancing down at the car loaded with explosives. The camera lens doesn't lie and it sees everything. You can even note the apprehensive look on Manderson's face. He had to get off the platform or die, so during what was nearly a riot of excitement, while nobody paid any heed to him, he did leave. I saw him go and wondered. No one else paid much attention. So there are four points against Manderson."

"Four?" Commissioner Warner asked.

"His leaving the platform in time to avoid the intended blast is one," the Black Bat enumerated. "The movie film showing his nervousness and anxiety over the time is another. The fact that he has in his possession certain documents that only Garfield could have given him is something else, and while Manderson was searching the darkroom, after murdering Garfield, he picked up some moist negatives. They were worthless and he thoughtlessly dropped them again. But he left clear,

"You're mad!" cried the Welfare Commissioner.

uncompromising fingerprints practically frozen into the negatives. Furthermore, you'll find the loot from some of those robberies right here in Manderson's house."

Manderson got up from his chair very slowly.

"Perhaps," he said in a quavering voice, "I should get it over with and unburden my soul. The loot is here. What's the use denying the evidence you've heard. It's over there—in my wall safe."

ALL eyes followed Manderson's pointing left hand. His right moved like the speed of light toward his coat and came away with a gun. He shoved it into the middle of Commissioner Warner's back.

"All right!" be rasped. "Now drop that gun, Black Bat. Drop it or I'll blow Warner's spine out through his stomach."

"Don't do it, Black Bat," Warner said in a strained voice. "He'll shoot anyway. Don't let him get away."

"I'll get clear," Manderson thundered. "Maybe I didn't get the ten million, but I've got enough cash and jewels to last me. And if the Black Bat hadn't stuck his nose into my business, I'd have got away with it! So I'll tell you this, the Black Bat is Tony Quinn! I know he is Quinn! I can prove it."

The Black Bat watched Manderson narrowly, holding his gaze by sheer force of will. Behind Manderson, Sergeant McGrath was carefully taking aim. Manderson had forgotten the doughty detective sergeant.

McGrath's gun, resting against a crooked arm, centered on Manderson's head. He meant to stun him, for McGrath's soul was filled with high glee also. He wanted Manderson alive to testify against the Black Bat—or Tony Quinn. But more than that McGrath wanted his superior officer to live.

He squeezed the trigger and at that instant Manderson turned his head slightly. The slug caught him full in the temple. He pitched backward and fell with a thud that shook the house. Warner grasped the arm of a chair for support. The few seconds of suspense had shaken even his sturdy nerves.

Bride was screaming to be freed of his handcuffs. Henning was hunched in a chair, shaking his head slowly.

McGrath raised his gun.

"Got you this time, Black Bat!" he shouted. "Got you cold! You are Tony Quinn! Manderson said so and I'll—"

Then McGrath's jaw fell. There was no Black Bat. He had vanished as completely as though a trapdoor had opened beneath his feet. Only the open window at the rear of the room indicated his manner of escape.

"I'll nail him anyway," McGrath yelled. "I've got a fast car outside and I'll reach Quinn's house before he does."

CHAPTER XXI
Sign of the Black Bat

HASTE in his every movement, McGrath paused only long enough to examine Manderson. He was quite dead. But when McGrath headed for the door, Commissioner Warner was after him. They got in the police car together.

"I've got him this time!" McGrath gloated. "Got him so he'll never find a way out."

"Aren't you a little too happy over all this?" Warner asked. "If Tony Quinn is the Black Bat, as you insist, we do owe him something. He saved the city ten million dollars and broke the back of the worst crime ring we've encountered in years."

"Makes no difference," McGrath grumbled as he swung around a corner and opened the siren wide. "The Black Bat has broken the law. He's killed men, burglarized places and done anything he wanted to. You're not asking me to forget this, Commissioner?"

Warner shook his head. "I know better, and you are a policemen with a sworn duty to perform. So am I. But McGrath, I hope you're wrong."

"I'm not. How can I be? Manderson was Yancey. He knew Quinn was the Black Bat. That's why he demanded that Quinn carry the money. Manderson identified the Black Bat before he died. Maybe without Manderson's testimony we couldn't convict Quinn of being the Black Bat. But if I get to his house first, I'll convict him. He won't have an alibi."

McGrath braked the car to a stop in front of Quinn's house. He was out of the car in a flash and streaking up the path to the front door. He jabbed the bell and beat the door panels with the heel of his hand. The porch light was turned on and Silk opened the door. Silk looked pale and extremely worried.

"Have you found him then?" he asked. "He's—dead?"

"The devil he is," McGrath growled. "This time you can't stall me. I know Quinn isn't home, but he will be pretty soon and when he does get home—"

"Sergeant," Commissioner Warner called. "Quinn is here. He's being helped out of a taxi now."

McGrath spun around, ran back to the street and walked up to Tony Quinn belligerently. The taxi driver still held Quinn's arm.

"I found this guy wandering around the state highway about three miles outta the city," he said. "He's blind, so I took him home. It's okay, ain't it?"

"How long ago did you find him?" McGrath barked.

"Twenty minutes," the driver answered. He was a hulking giant of a man and impatient to get started.

"Who is it?" Tony Quinn asked mildly. "I'm not

feeling very well. I—I was struck several times by this man I was sent to meet. I don't know exactly what happened."

"Take it easy, Tony." Warner grasped Quinn's arm. "McGrath is here raving again that you're the Black Bat. Let me help you inside. Then you can tell us the rest of the story."

Silk rushed out to aid Quinn. He helped him off with his torn coat, fussed around applying antiseptic to the bruise on his chin. Quinn sighed deeply.

"I'm afraid I failed," he said. "I couldn't do very much, of course. There was an airplane. It landed and then took right off. Someone seized me, struck me, and I—I don't remember much after that until I heard—"

"You heard somebody mention the name of the Black Bat!" McGrath broke in. "Sure, the Black Bat came there and rescued you. He saved the money too. You'll have to think faster than that, Quinn. Manderson named you as the Black Bat."

"Did he?" Quinn asked mildly. "But why should Manderson say such a thing? How in the world could he even think that?"

"Because Manderson was Yancey. I just killed him. He knew you were the Black Bat, Quinn, so there's no use stalling. Stick out your mitts. I've got a nice pair of handcuffs for you."

Before anyone could interfere, McGrath had closed the links around Quinn's wrists. He stepped back triumphantly.

"I got a good reason for putting the pinch on you and once you're downtown, I'll get every eye s pecialist I can round up to prove you can see."

"But–but—" Quinn raised his cuffed hands in what was almost a pathetic appeal. His eyes stared straight ahead and were absolutely blank. "I don't know what you mean, Sergeant. It's all been very well, playing with me, trying to trip me up as this—this Black Bat. I've enjoyed it, but handcuffs—you're carrying things too far."

"Then maybe you can tell me why Manderson named you?" McGrath ground out.

"Why, yes, perhaps I can. If Manderson was Yancey, then he took me to some place not far from the aviation field where I met him. I heard Yancey say something about the electric light wires being cut. Then someone came in and there was a terrible fight. Yancey kept yelling that he'd tell everyone I was the Black Bat, but I assure you while that fight went on, I was in a corner, huddled out of the way. It must have been the Black Bat who saved me, and Yancey—or Manderson—thought it was I."

"Yeah," McGrath rasped. "Know what I say to that story? Nuts!"

"But Sergeant—" a voice said mildly. McGrath spun around, reached for his gun and his hand froze.

The Black Bat stood at the end of the room, near an open window. He had a gun in his hand.

"You don't have much consideration for this blind man, Sergeant," the Black Bat said in a voice so low that his audience had difficulty in hearing him. "I heard Yancey call out that Quinn was the Black Bat. He really thought so because I was in the shack when he pushed Quinn inside. There were no lights because I cut the wires. You can find that out for yourself if you wish. I jumped Yancey and he thought Quinn had done it. Now, gentlemen, thank you for a pleasant time. To you, Sergeant McGrath, I extend my con—my condo—my condolences. Better luck next time."

The Black Bat's gun pointed ceiling-ward and fired one shot. The lights winked out. Curtains swished while McGrath yelled for candles, searchlights, matches.

Silk found a table lamp, plugged it in and looked around. Tony Quinn sat in his chair, his head turned toward the spot where the Black Bat had stood.

COMMISSIONER WARNER was blinking in amazement. McGrath seared the air with oaths as he removed the cuffs from Quinn's wrists.

"Just the same," he muttered, "I was sure you was the Black Bat. Nothing but the presence of the Black Bat himself could have changed my mind. I still think you're in with him."

Warner took McGrath's arm.

"Come along, you stupid dolt," he said shortly. "I hope you've learned a lesson this time. Quinn practically sacrificed his life to help us and you repay him this way. He needs rest. Now get out of here. I'll meet you in the car."

McGrath stalked out while Warner walked over to Quinn and put a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"Congratulations," he said. "A clever piece of work, Tony."

Quinn looked puzzled. "You mean, you think as McGrath, that—"

WARNER'S face broke into a wide grin.

"Of course not. I meant the job you did in carrying the money, risking your life. Of course, Manderson must have been wrong in identifying you as the Black Bat. At any rate he'll never testify to it and—I'm very glad of that, Tony."

Warner nodded to Silk, caught up with McGrath who was slowly ambling toward the police car and took McGrath's arm.

"Don't feel too badly about it, Sergeant," he said. "Even if Quinn was the Black Bat, you've got to admit he did some good work for us."

McGrath got in the rear seat.

"I could have sworn I had him that time," he grumbled. "I can't figure it out. His alibi is good, sure. You know, Commissioner, maybe I have been wrong. I... say, what's on my neck?"

Warner peered in the darkness, detached something and placed it in McGrath's hand. It was a tiny image of a black bat! Within the house Quinn heard McGrath's howl of rage from the car. Then Silk began pulling down curtains. Ten minutes passed. The door to Quinn's laboratory slid back and Carol emerged. Behind her stalked Butch, a piece of paper in his hand.

"You did it!" Carol cried eagerly. "Tony, I couldn't even think for a minute. I listened on the other side of the hidden door. Why, he even put handcuffs on you!"

Butch moved forward a step, frowning deeply.

"Boss," he said and extended the paper he held, "what's this word mean? Con–condo–condolences? Boy, I nearly slipped on that one."

Quinn took both of Carol's hands in his own. He grinned at her.

"Your heart was in your mouth, eh?" he said. "Why, when Butch stumbled over that word, I thought they'd get wise in a second. You drilled him well, Carol. He didn't even ad lib once, or drop a 'g.' And standing near those black drapes Silk hung tonight—the difference in Butch's height and mine—his weight, too—wasn't noticeable. Well, here we are again—a nice little family circle. What are you going to do now?"

Butch cast a level look at Carol.

"Me, I'm gonna get me some sleep, Boss," he muttered,

Silk yawned. "I think I'll turn in, too, if you don't mind."

Carol pulled over a footstool and sat down at Quinn's feet.

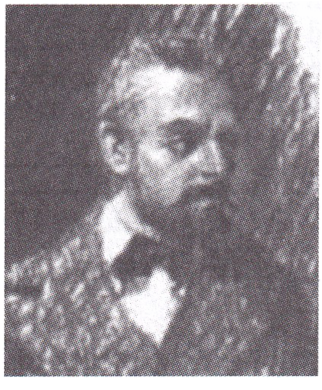
"As for me," she said with a laugh, "I was hoping Silk and Butch would say exactly that."

THE END

RAYMOND THAYER AND THE MASK by Anthony Tollin

Rounding out this volume, we present "The Mask Returns" from *Exciting Comics* #2, the second installment of Raymond Thayer's illustrated adaptation of Norman Daniels' 1939 pulp novel, *Brand of the Black Bat.*

The Black Bat debuted in the July 1939 issue of *Black Book Detective*, which went on sale just weeks after Batman premiered in *Detective Comics* #27. Though Norman Daniels' first Black Bat novel had been purchased by Ned Pines' Better Publications the previous December, the amazing similarities between the two bat-themed characters led to threats of legal action between National Comics and Pines' pulp operation.



Raymond Thayer

"There was a lawsuit almost pending," recalled Batman co-creator Bill Finger. "It was a weird coincidence. Apparently the character had already been written and on the drawing board. Whit Ellsworth used to be a pulp writer for Better Publications. So, through Ellsworth's intervention, a lawsuit was averted. They were ready to sue us, and we were ready to sue them. It was just one of those wild coincidences."

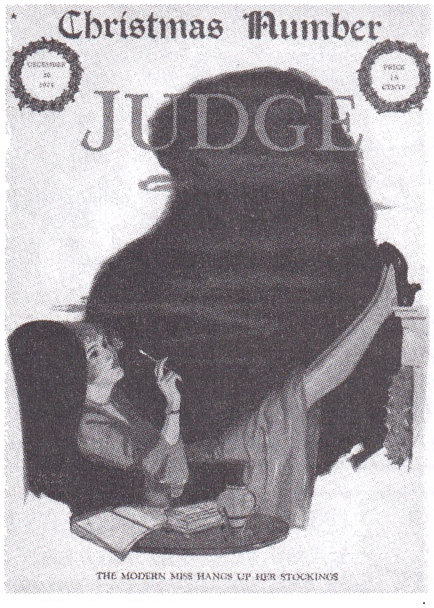
With the assistance of Whit Ellsworth, a veteran DC editor and freelance pulp writer, a lawsuit was narrowly avoided. Better Publications promised to keep the Black Bat out of comic books, while National Comics agreed that Batman would never appear in pulp magazines.

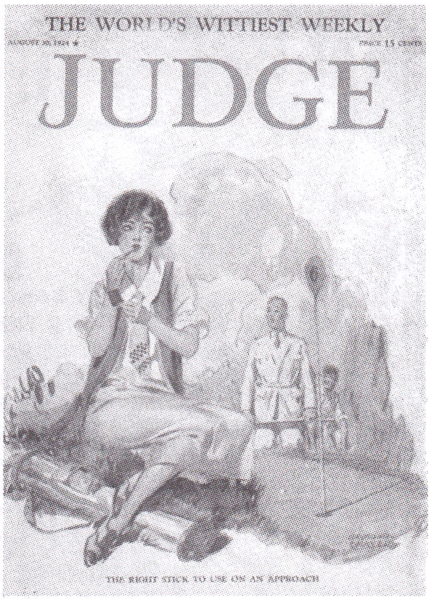
Thus, Better Publications' Nedor comics line was forced to rename its bat-garbed mystery man when *Brand of the Black Bat* was adapted for *Exciting Comics* #1 in 1940.* The publishing house originally intended to call its revamped protagonist "The Owl," but was forced to retitle the four-color feature "The Mask" when a flying superhero with that name appeared in Centaur Publications' *Funny Pages* #1, illustrated by comic book pioneer Martin Filchock.

Though many early comic books featured substandard artwork by inexperienced newcomers toiling in assembly line art shops, *The Mask* feature showcased above-average 1940 comic book art courtesy of Raymond Thayer (1886-1955), a veteran magazine illustrator whose cover paintings had graced such prestigious slick magazines as *Judge*, *Life* and *Collier's Magazine*, while he created interior illustrations for *Blue Book* and *Open Road for Boys*. Thayer's covers and interior art also appeared in many pulp magazines including *Argosy All-Story Weekly*, *Gay Book*, *True Gang Life* and *Five Novels*.

Born in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, Raymond Lowry Thayer graduated from Cleveland's East High School, and moved to New York City to study at the Art Students League (where he met his future wife, Lillian Seldon Lloyd). Renting a nearby studio on

*The Black Bat wasn't the only pulp hero to be renamed in the first issue of *Exciting Comics*. Edmond Hamilton's first Captain Future adventure was adapted to the four-color format as Major Mars.





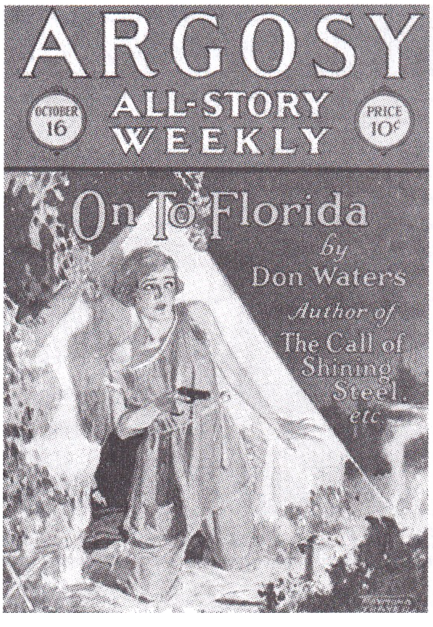
Raymond Thayer painted a wide variety of magazine and pulp cover paintings.

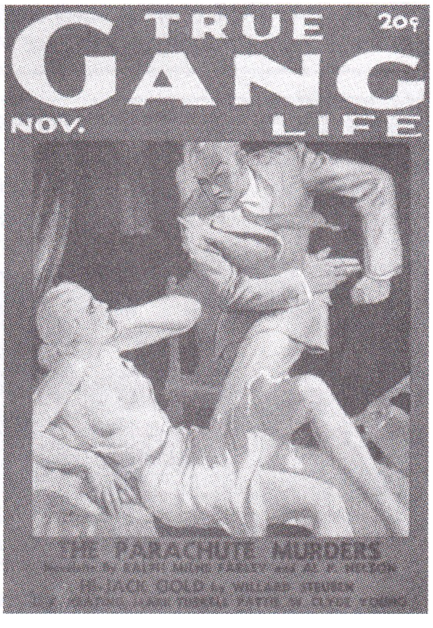
West 59th Street, Thayer began selling illustrations to the *Washington Post* for newspaper syndication.

Thayer became an associate partner in the Paul Wing Art Studio advertising agency in 1919, and three years later opened the Stoll & Thayer Advertising Agency with Charles Theophile Stoll (the father of *Black Mask* and *Dime Mystery* cover artist Gloria Stoll, a protogé of Black Bat cover artist Rafael De.Soto). After creating advertising art for a variety of clients including Ivory Soap and the Franklin automobile company, he teamed with pulp artist Adolphe Barreaux in 1928 to open the Thayer & Barreaux Advertising Agency. Raymond was a charter member of the New York Artists Guild (along with James Montgomery Flagg), and was also a member of the Society of Illustrators and the Players Club.

In addition to *The Mask* feature, Thayer also drew *The Sphinx* and *Dan Williams, Private Investigator* features in *Exciting Comics*, *Detective-Sergeant Burke* in *Startling Comics* and *The Woman in Red* in *Thrilling Comics*, and later *Captain Flight* for Harry Chesler's Four Star Publications.

Raymond Thayer's impressive professional resumé is in stark contrast with that of many early comic book artists, so it's somewhat of a mystery why the established illustrator moved into the lower-paying comic book field. It's likely that his illustration assignments had been reduced by the 1937-38 Depression-related contraction in pulp publishing, though he could have been experimenting with graphic storytelling with the hopes of landing a lucrative job in syndicated newspaper comic strips, which had recruited such respected illustrators as Frank Godwin and Austin Briggs. It's also possible that Thayer recognized that pulp magazines were in a continuing decline while the new comic books were exploding in circulation, and desired to get in on the ground floor of the new publishing phenomenon. •





A 75th anniversary illustrated classic from Volume 1, Number 1 of *Exciting Comics*

adapted by Raymond Thayer from Norman A. Daniels' novel *Brand of the Black Bat*

A 75th anniversary illustrated classic from Volume 1, Number 2 of *Exciting Comics*

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THE MEN BEHIND THE BLACK BAT

Norman A. Daniels (1905-95) worked as an insurance investigator after studying at Columbia and Northwestern universities. Born Norman Arthur Danberg in Brooklyn, Connecticut, Daniels made his first professional sale to *Gangster Stories* in 1931, receiving $29.75 for "Vapors of Vengeance."

Daniels breakout year was 1934, when his output jumped to 400,000 words, including fifteen stories for Harry Donenfeld's *Spicy* pulps. During the following decades, the versatile wordsmith produced tales in a wide variety of genres, including science fiction, horror, detective, adventure, sports and love, selling stories to such diverse publications as *G-Men*, *Thrilling Spy Stories*, *Strange Stories*, *Air War*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Startling Stories* and even John W. Campbell's *Unknown*.

Working under the "G. Wayman Jones" house name, Daniels created the Black Bat for Standard editor Leo Margulies, and eventually wrote 55 of the 62 Black Bat pulp novels. "Leo asked me to think of something to compete with The Shadow," Daniels explained. "I came up with this character I called the Tiger because in the initial episode, the hero had been doused with acid. His face was lined like a Tiger's. He wanted to change the Tiger to the Black Bat because he wanted it to go into *Black Book Detective* magazine."

One of the most prolific writers for the hero pulps, Daniels pounded out dozens of *Phantom Detective* novels, 23 Jerry Wade stories and 15 Crimson Mask novelettes for *Detective Novels*, along with 23 Skipper shorts for the back pages of *Doc Savage*.

From 1940-43, Daniels averaged a million words annually, an output only surpassed by *The Shadow*'s Walter B. Gibson. Daniels was assisted by his wife Dorothy, who regularly edited and retyped his manuscripts before launching her own writing career.

During 1940 alone, Norman Daniels wrote five Black Bat novels, eight Candid Camera Kid tales, four Masked Detective novels, four Crimson Mask novelettes, three Dan Fowler novels and single adventures of The Skipper and The Eagle, in addition to a variety of non-series stories.

Daniels scripted *Star Ranger* for MacFadden and *Ghost Riders* for the Centaur Comics Group during the earliest years of comic books, and later produced short text features for Street & Smith's comic book line.

Between 1949 and 1954, Daniels scripted 67 half-hour adventures for the *Nick Carter, Master Detective* radio series.

During the Golden Age of Television, Daniels wrote teleplays for a number of popular television series including *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Colt .45*, *Zane Grey Theater*, *The Chevron Hall of Stars*, *Sugarfoot*, *The Web*, *The Restless Gun* and *The Ford Television Theatre*.

Norman Daniels later wrote dozens of original paperback mysteries including two Avengers novels, *The Magnetic Man* (1968) and *Moon Express* (1969), featuring John Steed and Emma Peel from the popular British television series.

Rafael DeSoto (1904-1992) was born in Puerto Rico and trained as a priest at St. Joseph's Seminary in San Juan, but decided to become an artist rather than complete his religious training, joking that "I liked girls too much."

He immigrated to the United States in 1923, eventually working at a printing company designing soda-pop labels and later painting lobby cards for silent films.

DeSoto began selling interior illustrations for Street & Smith's magazines in 1929, and two years later began producing cover art for a handful of pulps including *Western Story Magazine*, *Wild West Weekly*, *Top Notch*, *Detective Book* and *Five Novels Monthly*.

Within a few years, DeSoto became one of the busiest pulp cover artists, creating stunning cover paintings for *Black Book Detective* (including those for both novels reprinted in this volume), *Dime Detective*, *Ten Detective Aces*, *Phantom Detective*, *The Spider*, *Thrilling Mystery*, *Popular Detective* and such prestigious pulp magazines as *Adventure*, *Argosy* and *Black Mask*, along with grisly Weird Menace covers for *Dime Mystery* and *Terror Tales*.

DeSoto's interior illustrations also appeared in such prestigious slick magazines as *Collier's*, *Redbook*, *The Ladies Home Journal*, *Liberty* and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

With the end of the Pulp Era, DeSoto became a top paperback cover artist, producing paintings for Pocket Books, Ace, Bantam, Dell, Signet and Popular Library (for which he created his legendary *H is for Heroin* painting).

DeSoto retired from commercial illustration in 1964 to teach art at the State University of New York in Farmingdale, and continued to teach private art classes for the rest of his life.

"I love painting," he explained. "It's not only because I like to paint and I've spent my whole life doing it, but I recommend it for everyone. When you are painting you forget all your troubles. Your brain can only concentrate on one thing at a time, and when you're painting, you forget everything else! That's good therapy! I am still looking forward to doing the most interesting painting I've ever made. I have some more to do. I'll be going after it until I die." •

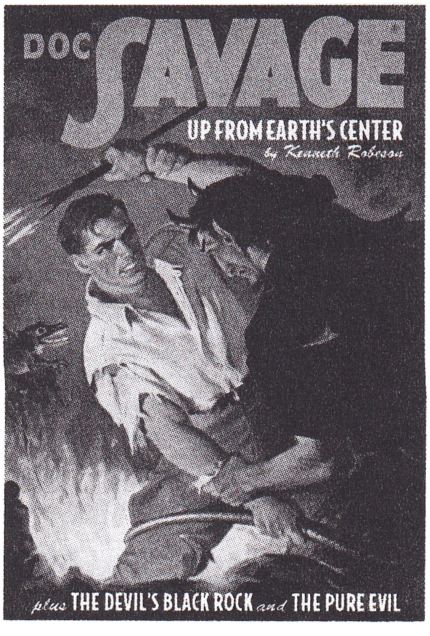
Coming soon in THE BLACK BAT #3:

978-1-60877-201-8

The cowled superhero whose creation paralleled Batman's returns in classic espionage thrillers by Norman Daniels writing as "G. Wayman Jones. First, with the outbreak of World War II, foreign spies flood the United States to challenge the Nemesis of Crime in *The Black Bat's Spy Trail*, edited by future *Batman* editors Mort Weisinger and Jack Schiff. Then, a rogue Nazi agent offers former district attorney Tony Quinn a deal he can't refuse in *Captains of Death*. GOLDEN AGE OF COMICS BONUS: The Mask returns in a rare 1940 illustrated thriller from Nedor's *Exciting Comics* #3. This collector's classic reproduces the classic color pulp covers by Ernest Chiriacka and Rafael DeSoto and the original interior illustrations by Harry Parkhurst.

And coming in DOC SAVAGE #87:

Sanctum Books completes its reprinting of all 182 original *Doc Savage* pulp novels with three hellish thrillers by Lester Dent writing as "Kenneth Robeson." First, the Man of Bronze struggles to prevent the Nazis from obtaining *The Devil's Black Rock*, a mysterious force that could change the course of the war! Then, Doc teams with three ghost hunters to destroy *The Pure Evil*. Finally, Doc Savage and his aides journey to the gates of Hell and must battle demon-like creatures in order to return *Up from Earth's Center* in his legendary ultimate pulp odyssey! This instant collector's item showcases the original color pulp covers by George Rozen, Emery Clarke and Edd Cartier, Paul Orban's interior illustrations and historical commentary by Will Murray.



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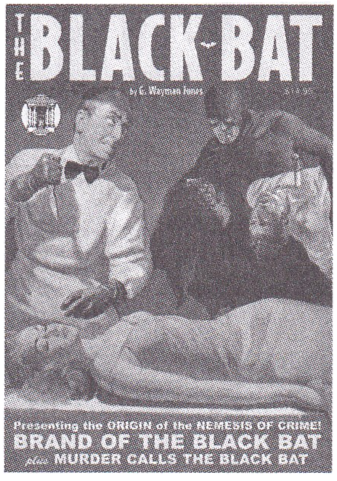
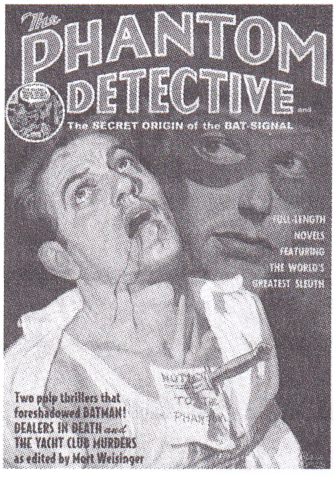
STILL AVAILABLE FROM SANCTUM BOOKS!

THE BLACK BAT #1: Brand of the Black Bat & Murder Calls the Black Bat —INTRODUCING THE NEMESIS OF CRIME!



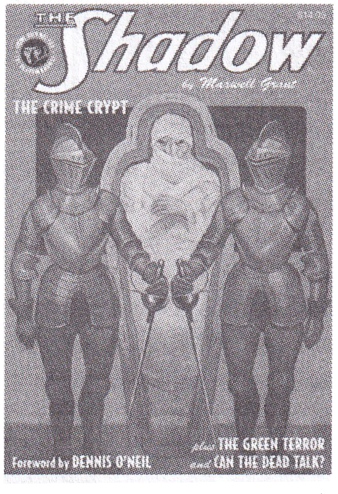
Sanctum Books presents the 1939 novels that introduced the caped crimebuster whose adventures paralleled Batman's and inspired Two-Face's origin, written by Norman A. Daniels as "G. Wayman Jones" for editors Mort Weisinger and Jack Schiff. First, doomed to blindness by a murderous acid attack, D.A. Tony Quinn makes darkness his weapon with *The Brand of the Black Bat*. Then, *Murder Calls the Black Bat* into a deadly war against corruption as Tony Quinn battles to prevent the biggest jewel heist of the century! *Golden Age of Comics Bonus*: the debut of The Mask from Nedor's *Exciting Comics* #1. This instant collector's item showcases the original color pulp covers by Rudolph Belarski and Emery Clarke and interior illustrations by Harry Parkhurst, plus Will Murray relates how a lawsuit with DC Comics was narrowly averted. 978-1-60877-183-7 $14.95 (+ $3 postage within U.S. if ordered separately)

THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE #2: Dealers in Death & The Yacht Club Murders—THE SECRET ORIGIN OF THE BAT-SIGNAL!



The pulp era's longest-running supersleuth returns in two novels edited by longtime *Superman* and *Batman* editor Mort Weisinger! First, newspaper editor Frank Havens installs a rooftop signal device to summon The Phantom to combat *Dealers in Death* in the classic pulp novel that inspired the Bat-signal. Then, Muriel Havens is kidnapped by The Bat while investigating *The Yacht Club Murders* in a thrilling pulp novel by Batman scripter Charles Greenberg! *Golden Age of Comics Bonus*: the *Clarion*'s signal beacon summons the Phantom Detective to investigate "The Case of the Complex Corpse" in an illustrated story by Edmond Good from *Thrilling Comics* #65! This double-novel collector's edition showcases both classic color pulp covers and the original interior illustrations, plus "Batman's Pulp Origins" by Will Murray. 978-1-60877-169-1 $14.95 (+ $3 postage within U.S. if ordered separately)

THE SHADOW Annual #1: The Crime Crypt & The Green Terror—Batman Foreshadowed with a foreword by Dennis O'Neil



Concealed within an ancient mummy case, the Dark Avenger smuggles himself into a criminal mastermind's *Crime Crypt* using the same gimmick that Doctor Doom reprised in the 1950 Batman story, "1,001 Trophies of the Batcave." Then, The Shadow battles *The Green Terror*, a criminal whose use of scientifically induced fear preceded the Scarecrow's famous modus operandi. Finally, in a classic radio script that foreshadowed Batman's landmark Ra's Al Ghul saga, Lamont Cranston dies so that The Shadow can go undercover to battle a supervillain who has discovered his secret identity in "Can the Dead Talk?" This deluxe special showcases the classic color pulp covers by George Rozen and Graves Gladney and the original interior illustrations by Tom Lovell, Paul Orban and Edd Cartier, with original commentary by popular culture historian Will Murray. 978-1-60877-190-5 $14.95 (+ $3 postage within U.S. if ordered separately)

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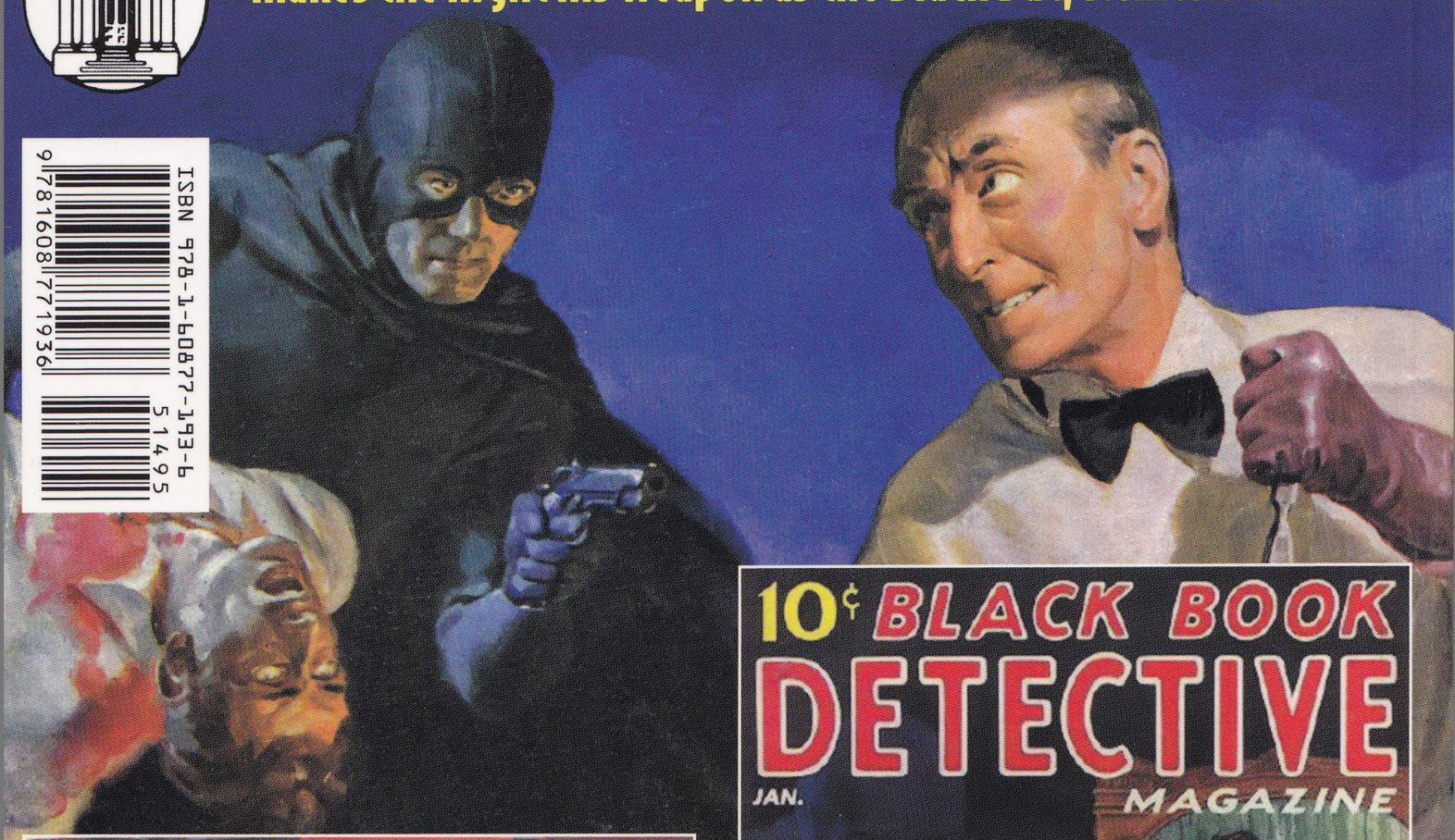
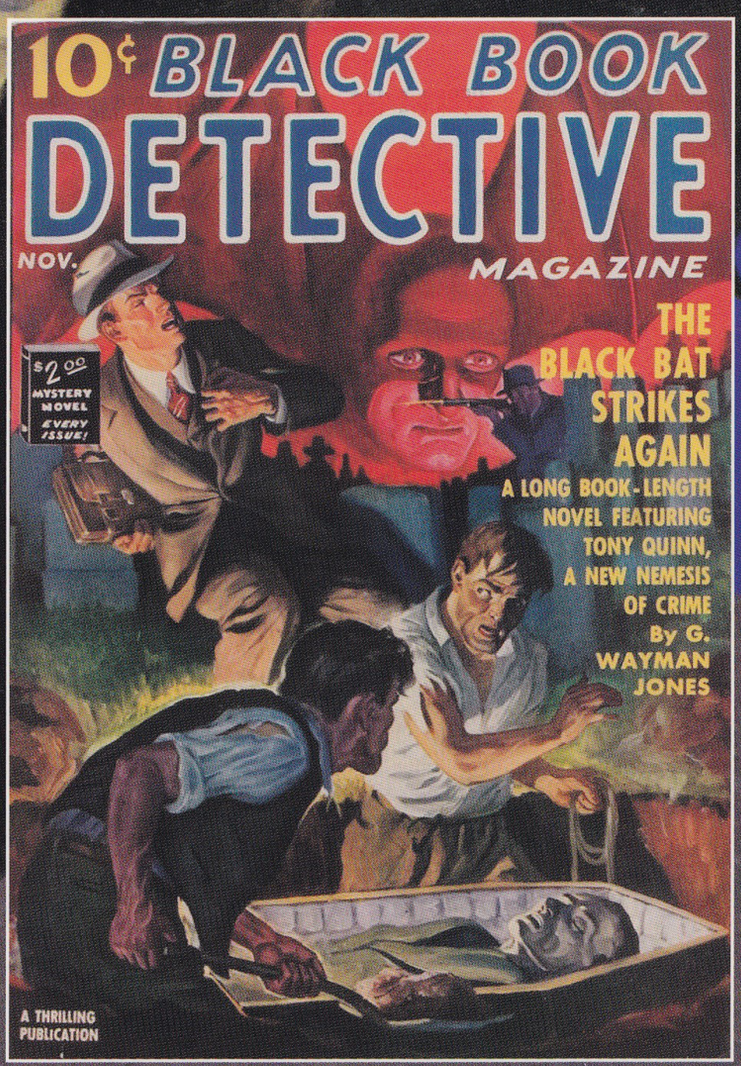
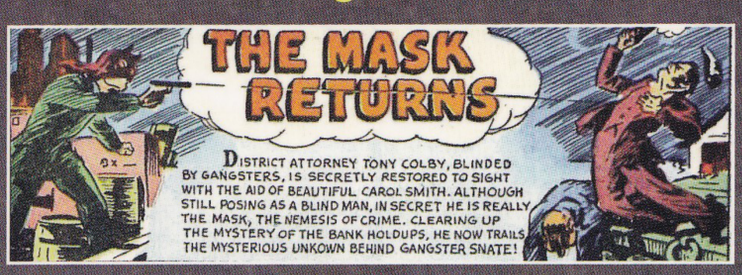
Blinded and scarred by a mob acid attack, D.A. Tony Quinn makes the night his weapon as the Black Bat, Nemesis of Crime!





Mass murders set the Cowled Crime-buster in pursuit of a gang of satanic killers as *The Black Bat Strikes Again*!

The *Black Bat's Challenge* is to unmask the hidden leader of a vicious gang of beggars.

Plus a Golden Age of Comics classic!